



The Other Side of Paradise: Life in the New Cuba

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Change looms in Havana, Cuba's capital, a city electric with uncertainty yet cloaked in cliché, 90 miles from U.S. shores and off-limits to most Americans. Journalist Julia Cooke, who lived there at intervals over a period of five years, discovered a dynamic scene: baby-faced anarchists with Mohawks gelled with laundry soap, whiskey-drinking children of the elite, Santería trainees, pregnant prostitutes, university graduates planning to leave for the first country that will give them a visa.

This last generation of Cubans raised under Fidel Castro animate life in a waning era of political stagnation as the rest of the world beckons: waiting out storms at rummy hurricane parties and attending raucous drag cabarets, planning ascendant music careers and black-market business ventures, trying to reconcile the undefined future with the urgent today.

Eye-opening and politically prescient, *The Other Side of Paradise* offers a deep new understanding of a place that has so confounded and intrigued us.

The Other Side of Paradise: Life in the New Cuba Details

Date : Published April 1st 2014 by Seal Press

ISBN : 9781580055314

Author : Julia Cooke

Format : Paperback 248 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, History, Autobiography, Memoir



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From Reader Review The Other Side of Paradise: Life in the New Cuba for online ebook

Christina Quintana says

"In Cuba, you were free to choose your fate until it bumped into the country's fate. Then you were invited to make your destiny elsewhere."

THE OTHER SIDE OF PARADISE is a love song to Cubans, those who continue to call the island home, and those who speckle the rest of the world. It is a deeply human exploration of a familiar youth culture, made unique by the strikingly particular circumstances of the island under one Castro, and then another.

Cooke's book provides the opportunity to see beyond the Buena Vista Social Club Cuba into the realities of twenty-first century Cuban twenty-somethings. Through their stories, we come to grips with why the modern story of the island is both "an exodus" and "not an exodus."

And then the book leaves us with the collective question: with so much change in the last ten, five years, what's next? What will the fate of the island be post Raul in 2018?

Marion says

I read this book while I was in Cuba on a holiday, and enjoyed it very much. Cooke writes evocatively, uses all 5 senses (as another reviewer notes) and has a clever structure, taking a small Cuban selection of characters to explore various aspects of life in (almost) contemporary Cuba. The only reason I give it 4 rather than 5 stars is that, despite its name, it really doesn't say much about other parts of Cuba, just Havana.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

"Havana was a woman who had once been renowned for her beauty until hard times had soured her. Her hand had gotten heavy with makeup application; her necklines had crept down; her beauty was tainted with vulgarity. But sometimes, when she was alone, after she'd taken off her makeup, she danced in her garden, bare-faced and barefoot, to an old bolero, and the old elegance appeared, normal as a Tuesday evening."

I came across this book in NetGalley and was able to get an early copy for review, happily since I had yet to read a book from or about Cuba in my around the world reading challenge.

The author tells the story of modern Cuba through the lenses of the younger generation. In 2003, she spent a semester there as a student, and was able to return in 2009 and again in 2011 as a tourist/journalist.

Most chapters focus on one person in order to tell a different perspective of how people actually live. Most are in Havana. Characters range from disillusioned revolutionaries to prostitutes to apprentice Santería

priests. Through the author's eyes and the words of her acquaintances, we see a slightly newer Cuba, a country that has three forms of currency yet still has to rely on the black market to have enough food to eat. New Cuba can't offer reliable internet but has loosened the rules about religion and sexuality, and has legalized many professions that people could only do unofficially for a long time.

I feel like I learned a lot and got a better picture of how things are for my generation these days. Is life in the United States that much better?

"In Cuba, her baby would be guaranteed health care in a system that boasted a laudable record; despite the decrepit appearances of most of the country's hospitals, world health organizations cite Cuba's infant mortality rate as better than that of the United States. Her child would learn to read and Sandra would be guaranteed at least some food to get him or her through the first few years."

Some of the greatest conflict for young people in Cuba comes at the decision point of traveling outside the country. To do so may create opportunities, but staying away too long can label you as a traitor. Most of the younger people go through a crisis of identity when they have to choose, and it seemed like the majority of the people Cooke encountered can't separate their identities from that of their homeland.

Carol says

I have always wanted to go to Cuba. I love reading books by folks who've been embedded in a culture that I'm curious about. Julia Cooke is an excellent writer. Chapter by chapter she profiles different people that she knew over many years of living in Cuba. There is an engaging prostitute, the artist who shifts from entitlement to consciousness of his privileged position and the young woman who was trained as a journalist and ended up doing social service teaching Spanish to Chinese students. There are several other engaging profiles woven into stories of families.

Julia does an excellent job of profiling the intense and life changing effects of living with the bizarre and oppressive political shifts through the past 70 years.

I no longer want to go to Cuba. I'm very glad I read the book. I don't want to support a repressive, psychotic regime so I will spend my travel dollars elsewhere. Cuba has a long way to go to rejoin anything near a decent quality of life for its population.

Ann Tonks says

To begin with I was slightly put off by the tone of this book. A story of an American living on and off in Cuba who interviews the people she lives with or meets offered some interesting insights into the life in this semi-failed state. But the language was quite hyperbolic and somewhat off putting until I just let it go and was seduced by the story telling. Goths and gays, prostitutes and professionals, those resigned to staying and those desperate to leave - all stories worth hearing.

Suzka says

It was okay. I was headed to Cuba and read this on recommendation of an article I read, but it was just okay. And it didn't really dovetail with my experience, but to be fair, this isn't a Foreign Tourist on Vacation for Nine Days sort of account.

Rebecca Dougherty says

I hope Cooke is still traveling to & writing about Cuba, because I'm interested to read her perspective on the continued changes happening. This book along with Mark Kurlansky's have been very interesting from the perspective of Westerners who have traveled to & lived there for years.

Beverly says

Cook does a masterful job of showing what life, with all its complexities, has been like for young Cubans over the last decade or so. She neither sugarcoats nor romanticizes, but her genuine affection for Havana and its people shines through.

Dan Freeman says

Great profiles of Gen-X age people in Cuba, waiting (patiently or not) for change to come to this land lost in time. Colorful, magazine-essay style accounts of a variety of characters that help explain contemporary Cuban life. While not useful as a travel guide, it was great to read while I visited Cuba in April, 2017.

Tricina says

This book will suck you in. The author has an incredible eye for detail and, using all five senses, manages to bring Havana right to you, whether it's the ocean breezes that float through Elaine's kitchen window or the noises of G Street or the sharp zing of cakes made without the luxury of butter (because it's being sold on the black market, yo). This isn't a book about traveling, or politics. It's a book about the individuals who grow up in Cuba, the young adults who all love their home and yet strive to move away to anywhere they can make more money and shake off the weight of communism. I didn't mean to, but I read half the book while waiting for tire replacements. It was just the book I'd thrown in my bag for those just-in-case-I-end-up-waiting-somewhere moments and I'm so glad I did. My tire popped and in the next few ours as I sat around the side of the road and then tire shop in the uncomfortable plastic chairs and the dense fog of tire-smell, I took a trip to Havana where I met the most interesting people and had an incredible time. To say this book is engrossing is laughably understated.

Susan says

Subtitled, "Life in the New Cuba," this book was written by author Julia Cooke, who first visited the country in 2003 when she was twenty and who returned many times – most notably in 2009, when after many visits,

she actually moved to Cuba for several months to research this book. The author was interested in what it was like to grow up in Havana as the last generation of Cubans raised with Fidel Castro in charge of their country. Although Cuba has welcomed tourists, most Cubans have not travelled outside their own country – as you will read though, almost all of them discuss and plan leaving endlessly. Raised under a single political party, they live a life of great conformity in many ways, with shared experiences of rationed food and shortages.

Cuba is a country of great extremes. On a positive note, they have a literacy rate of 99%, healthcare for all, little violent crime and rations provide necessities. However, changes in Russia has meant that the Soviet subsidies, which held the Cuban economy afloat up to the nineties, have caused the country economic disasters which they are still trying to cope with. The people of Cuba have become adept at coping, using the black market and dreaming of exit visas to what they hope will be a better life.

Cooke intersperses the stories of many young Cubans with her own experiences, in an entertaining and thought provoking read. We meet many interesting characters as Cooke attempts to find an apartment in overcrowded Havana, meets Sandra – who can earn more money in one night as a prostitute than with a monthly wage as a hairdresser, mixes with Cuban punks, explores racism in Communist Havana, where 80% of University Professors are white, while 85% of those in prison are from the communities who began life in Cuba as slaves, working on sugar plantations and explore the country of Cuba through her eyes. It is a place which offers its young people an education, but also limits their chances - of corruption and hypocrisy and where, you feel, so many of its inhabitants are disenchanted. One of those that Cooke meets, says that when she finally leaves Cuba, she is congratulated as though she has been released from jail. You just hope that all these wonderful, innovative and capable people, find happiness either within Cuba or outside it and are grateful to the author for introducing them to us. This is a really unique read, about a unique country –well written, informative and enjoyable.

I received a copy of this book, from the publisher, for review.

Trashy Dreams says

Enjoyable and interesting, but only to a point. On the upside, Julia's experiences and stories are more intimate and engaging compared to some broad overview you might read in a magazine or newspaper. On the other hand, I didn't really learn much, outside of what I already knew of Cuba (which wasn't much to begin with).

About a third of the way in I kinda felt like I got everything I was gonna get out of the book: people are surviving and living their lives the best they can. Some are doing just fine, some want something more for themselves, some are just going with the flow, good or bad.

TOSOP wasn't boring or anything, but it's basically a travelogue. If you want something that's got some history or a focus on Cuba as a nation (past or present), you might wanna look somewhere else.

Julia Cooke says

Pride should start at home, right?

Rita says

An outsider who presents a sympathetic view of everyday life in Cuba as it emerges from a controlled economy reliant on outside benefactors to a economy which will have winners and losers as it adapts to "capitalism" to survive

Judah says

A well-written book about a society that is as captivating as it is bizarre. I assume the title is a nod to F.Scott Fitzgerald's "This Side of Paradise," which, if i'm remembering correctly, also chronicles a "lost generation." I still don't feel like I have a clear picture of what Cuba is like at this very moment and the changes that have been made (not sure what book I should read for that), but this is a remarkable (and disturbing!) look of what life has been like for the last generation of Cubans who grew up under Castro, beautifully told through intimate vignettes of very relatable and complex people. Well done.
