



Dirty Blonde and Half-Cuban

Lisa Wixon

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Based on the wildly popular, semi-autobiographical *Havana Honey* series published by Salon.com, *Dirty Blonde and Half-Cuban* is a gritty portrait of one woman's determination to infiltrate modern Cuba and find the father she has never known.

While on her search, privileged American Alysia Briggs ends up broke and alone in Havana. She's then forced to adopt the life of the jineteras-educated Cuban women who supplement a desperate income by accommodating sex tourists.

With an eye for detail and a razor wit, *Lisa Wixon* relates Alysia's journey and creates a love song to Cuba, a heartfelt tribute to a resilient people facing soul-numbing poverty in a land where M.D.s and Ph.D.s earn \$18 a month, and a pair of jeans costs twice as much.

Dirty Blonde and Half-Cuban Details

Date : Published March 22nd 2006 by Harper Perennial (first published May 3rd 2005)

ISBN : 9780060721756

Author : Lisa Wixon

Format : Paperback 272 pages

Genre : Fiction

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From Reader Review Dirty Blonde and Half-Cuban for online ebook

Laurie says

Book was written during the time I was traveling to Havana myself. Interesting story. Fairly believable knowing what I do about Cuba but some things perhaps a stretch.

Travel to Cuba and get to know the local people so you can see for yourself what it's really like there.

Tejas Janet says

Would give 3.5 stars if possible. Uneven but interesting. At times insightful, at times melodramatic. Might have been stronger as a nonfiction story rather than fictionalized, semi-autobiographical.

Seferina Limones says

When I first bought this book, I was just interested in it because of the title and the cover art. As I read it, however, I was captivated. This story is a woman's struggle in her homeland to find her father and learn of her true culture. Seeing Cuba through her perspective has made me add it to my list of countries to visit. The way she describes how difficult life is for the average Cuban made me realize that people who complain about life in America are just plain ignorant. I suggest this book for anyone who has never been outside the comfort of their nation, to see that life here is sheer luxury and that they should not take what we have for granted. This book does have sexually explicit passages, just a warning for those who can not handle a raw story.

Rikki Landry says

There were times that I couldn't put it down, and other times that I couldn't get through a page without being bored. I was really interested in the story line, I just didn't enjoy reading the book. It became more of a chore so I can't give this book more than a rating of 'it was ok'

Sherese says

Although this is technically fiction my understanding from the jacket of the novel is that this is semiautobiographical novel. If this is true, then this inside look at life in Cuba for educated high level skilled women who must basically prostitute themselves to foreign nationals in order to provide for their families is disturbing.

What's done well in this novel is presenting both good and bad of "Cuban version of Socialism" without

making any judgements. Everything else I found a little less compelling.

Lisa says

I feel like a lot of it didn't add up. Her real Cuban father had been living in the US the whole time and he knows she goes to Cuba to find him but then asks his friend to look after her and knows about her having to work as a sex worker but says he didn't know it was because she was financially in trouble? She was working as a freaking prostitute! Why else would you do that? It's interesting to see the author justify this form of prostitution as survival by crafting it as an experience necessary for survival except she totally sucks at it. For having grown up in the foreign service she had no common sense, but at least she had the strength to live a life without the creature comforts her mother was afraid of. I also wasn't a fan of white girl discovering she's Latina just so she could pass it off as it somehow making her extraordinary. She has loaded first world hangups but actually feels like what she's doing makes her on par with the Cuban people because now she's finally suffering like her countrymen when really it was self imposed exile, she could've had money sent to her at any given moment, but chose to be martyr instead.

Having been to Cuba twice, the descriptions made me want to go back all over again, it truly is one of the best places I've ever been, but not all what she describes here.

Cristi Romney Espinosa says

This book was highly recommended to me by a friend from book club, and fellow Goodreader. I was excited to start it, because when someone feels so passionate about a book, I'm always intrigued and want to read for myself what the fuss is about.

This book took hold of me from the very beginning. The descriptions were right up my alley. The metaphors and similes, long and descriptive, were perfect. The story itself was also intriguing, A 13 yr old whose mother dies of cancer...my story exactly. Only, with a twist. The man she always called "Dad" is not her real father. And her mother's dying wish is that she get to know her real father, in Cuba. I did not expect the extended stay in Cuba where Alysia, now grown, searches for her father. But the inside peek at the life of a jinetera is amazing.

Jinteras are not prostitutes. Not in the traditional sense, and through the story, I could sympathize with the jinteras and the choice they make to live in that world. I can't imagine choosing that life over one here in the U.S., but I suppose it would always depend on the situation.

There is a love story, of course, and it somewhat subdues the reality of jineterismo. In context, the lifestyle is not offensive or frightening. It is simply a way of life. And one can understand the need for it and the "pride" Wixon says the jinteras feel for helping their families in the only way possible.

I think that being Cuban-American myself, I saw this story differently than maybe someone else would. I can't imagine the people in Cuba who choose to live there. I see the faces of the men, women, children, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters who leave Cuba, risking everything, even their lives, in order to find freedom. I then find it difficult to believe that someone would choose to stay in Cuba and live a life as a jinetera rather than come to the U.S. and try to make a life. But of course, each person has their own choices to make and their own list of "pros and cons," just as Alysia had in the novel. And sometimes the best choice for one person, would not be the best choice for another.

I have already recommended the book to several other people. It is a must read. And despite the heavy subject matter, it is more light-hearted, fun and happier than one might expect.

Ron says

Not great literature ... not a great story, but wonderful texture of life in Cuba and the Cuban people.

Shannon (Giraffe Days) says

Alysia Briggs grew up the only child of an American diplomat serving all over the world. When her mother is dying of cancer when Alysia is only a child, she makes Alysia promise to go to Cuba and find José Antonio, her real father. Years later, Alysia finally talks to her Aunt June, her mother's sister, who confirms the truth: she has a whole family in Cuba she never knew of, but they know her. She was a baby and a toddler spending a lot of time with her Cuban family and father before the Briggs were moved on to Washington DC. Years of being a diligent student and making her father - step-father - happy have not made Alysia forget the promise she made her mother as a child. After a fruitless holiday in Cuba with Aunt June that discovered nothing, she almost gives up. But when she later learns of her aunt's death from her father who deliberately didn't tell her in time for her to visit June, Alysia feels so alienated from the man she's known as "dad" that she forever jeopardises her chances of being an American diplomat herself in order to go to Cuba for a year on a student visa. She's got the money her aunt left her and a year to find her real father.

But Cuba is nothing like America. It is a complex country of contrasts. With free education and medical care and some of the best doctors in the world, people struggle to live on \$18 a month - if they're lucky. Food rationing, supplies hard to come by, and isolation have created a unique people with their own social mores. When Alysia's money is stolen by the family she is lodging with - a family of doctors - no one is surprised and the police just shrug. Destitute and homeless, Alysia is helped by a doctor, Camila, who finds her a new place to live - an illegal setup in a country where everything is regulated by the government but where everyone is forced to do whatever they can for some extra cash.

And so Alysia does what so many others in the country do, including her friend Camila: the oldest job in the world. But in Cuba, as Camila explains, it's not prostitution. It's an art form. Like the courtesans and geishas of cultures mostly long gone, being a *jinetera* is about being sexy, intelligent, a good listener, socially adept and, yes, great in bed. The remittances from these foreigners - women as well as men - is the biggest source of income in the economy, bigger than tourism. It is a serious profession, with some women and men doing it full-time and others, like Camila, doing it to supplement their legitimate income.

Alysia is not good at being a *jinetera*, but she gets a bit of money along the way, enough to pay her rent and the many bribes she has to pay to people to help her find her father. Along the way, over the course of the year, she learns more about her homeland, the country where she was born, and tries to understand it through her American-cultured eyes. So that when she does finally meet her real father, the decision of whether to stay in Cuba or return to America becomes the toughest of all.

This novel began life as an online series called "Havana Honey" at Salon.com and it does have a tendency to read as the primary textbook-disguised-as-chicklit (or vice versa?) for young affluent white American women studying Cuban Culture 101. But to dismiss it as such would be to ignore its many positives. Either a

novel with a journalistic bent or a freelance journalism piece presented as a novel, it is highly readable and plenty educational as well as being a good - if at times cliched - story. What Wixon lacks in terms of original prose or fresh characters she makes up for in many other ways.

First of all, it *will* teach you - the non-Cuban, probably white, western reader - about modern-day Cuba, or Cuba in the mid two thousands anyway, before the embargo was sort-of lifted in 2009. Wixon doesn't smother you in history but parcels out fascinating bits here and there that provide context and enlightenment for what Alysia is experiencing. And because the story is told through Alysia's eyes and in her voice, it is *of course* a white, affluent, western perspective on this unique country. I was worried that, being written by an American, it would be judgemental or, on the flip side, too romantic. It is neither. It doesn't pass judgement, and while it is sympathetic towards Cuban citizens, it neither dramatises their everyday lives nor glosses over unsavoury facts, or ignores the positives. (There is drama though, lots of it, and it can come across as a bit overly-dramatic because of the writing: this is Wixon's debut novel, so I cut her some slack. It's too entertaining to quibble over the way it's written.)

And there are many positives about Cuba. It leads the world in many areas, especially health care and education (I myself attended a presentation by a leading Canadian expert, Dr Fraser Mustard - recently passed away, sadly - on early child development and the need to combine free health care with free education from before birth), and contributed hugely to music and other aspects of culture the world over. But it has also suffered. It is worth noting that Wixon never mentions Castro (either of them), never talks in broader terms about the government, only in the context of the effect on the people Alysia meets, and for the impact on her. America's invasion of Iraq, for example, which occurs during Alysia's year in Cuba (2005), comes up a few times, because this is also a country of highly politicised people.

In the context of the "jockeys", or *jinetera*, the broader economic and political context of the country is hugely relevant. It is a matter of survival, and no one looks down on a *jinetera* or labels them "sluts". Take her friend Camila, a heart surgeon:

...in her teens and twenties, [she] entertained foreign dignitaries at the behest of her government. [As] a reward for her success and beauty and brilliance, and upon finishing medical school, [she] was granted the prestigious position as head of the renowned heart institute. And with it, continued access to foreign men.

Camilla talks about [receiving] regular remittances from sometimes handsome - but always wealthy - suitors abroad. About the countless marriage proposals she's turned down to stay in her country, with her family. To continue *la lucha*. The struggle.

Camila graduated top of her class. She speaks five languages. Dignitaries from Mexico and South America and the Middle East subject their hearts to her expertise - in medical matters and those of love.

[...] The modern-day courtesans in Cuba, and most particularly in Havana, speak foreign tongues and hold respected degrees. In a society that praises a woman's sexual talents and beauty, and makes no judgement on the trading of those for money, the Cuban courtesan - the *jinetera* lures the most discriminating men in the world.

[...] "Prostitutes accept pay for one night," she says with a dismissive wave. "*Jineteras* use their

education and skills to weave fantasies of love." Our eyes meet in the reflection of the mirror. "Never forget that distinction." [pp57-8]

It's fascinating, the complexity of a country where doctors, lawyer, architects, engineers and others who, in western countries, are at the top earning range, earn next to nothing in Cuba - mostly because of the trade embargo, so that there's no money to pay doctor's salaries, there are no buildings to be built or wealthy clients to defend at court. In fact, it is the maids and bartenders who earn the most and have the sought-after jobs.

El Floridita's barkeeps have the snappiest job in Havana and are paid far better than engineers or lawyers. Leonel and Chico both hold PhDs in engineering, and practiced their trade for several years before being rewarded with the lusted-after slots as rum pullers. Hotel maids, tour guides, and taxi drivers are, in fact, the best-paid legal professions in the country. Many who hold them consider themselves lucky, and have typically given up previous careers in accounting, management, and dentistry. [p.153]

It is a country of contradictions and polar opposites, and Alyzia is vividly aware that her North American upbringing hasn't prepared her to understand these many shades of grey that are constantly in flux. "I'm unaccustomed to the Latin way, that idea that opposing beliefs can be held simultaneously, in one human heart, without a need for settlement." [p.101] Alyzia brings with her a whole shitload of American white, privileged mores, expectations and values - much like the book's readers. Forced to do the one thing her upbringing has taught her to feel immense guilt and shame for just in order to survive and fulfil her quest, her journey, to find her father, it is like stripping her of everything familiar and drenching her in the truth of what it means to be really Cuban, not just pretending at it (though there are times, like when there's no more toilet paper for sale, that she uses her U.S. passport to go to the hotel bathroom, reserved for tourists).

In my own country, in my social circles back home, broadcasting one's sexuality with provocative dress or demeanor is frowned upon, as is an aggressive chasing of men. These things happen, of course, but where I come from, the art is in the subtleties. In Cuba, I'm adjusting to the extremes. Men are expected to be *men*, and women are expected to be *women*, and *jineteras* are expected to pursue *yumas* with the voracity of a firefighter squelching a schoolyard blaze. I've never felt completely comfortable with my womanliness. Here I've been forced to harness my sexual power, put it on display, and market my goods to those who can provide security. It's both liberating and terrifying. [p.113]

You definitely get a feel for Cuba and Havana, in particular - less so the rural areas, as Alyzia doesn't travel there. The urban landscape is rich, colourful, a bizarre mix of 1950s glam and poverty. It's the people who make the place, and it's a novel that's deeply respectful of the people, their choices and their pride in their country. That comes across clear, that Cubans both want to prosper and do better, even if it means leaving and taking their chances in the U.S., and have immense pride in being Cuban and what they fought for. Yes,

there's propaganda in that, but every country has that: a national identity espoused enthusiastically and believed in. That's what makes a unified country. The difference is with Cuba, that when these highly educated people living in often extreme poverty have an opinion different from those in power, they must keep it to themselves or risk being arrested. It is sad to think of the countries in the world - for it isn't just Cuba, look at China etc - where the government doesn't trust its own people. Like in a family, that's no way to raise children.

Dirty Blonde and Half-Cuban isn't a story about sex, it's a story about the people of Cuba, and on the narrative front, a story about an American discovering her Cuban heritage, trying to fit in, and ultimately deciding where she belongs in the world. While I liked her final decision, I had to roll my eyes at the novelisation of it: it was classic Hollywood B-grade film, a light summer hit that obeys the formula to a T. It was the most disappointing thing about the entire book. But I loved that it delved into the lives of the people, rather than get sidetracked by the intense political history of the country, or take sides.

And if it had to do it through the eyes of someone like Alysia, well when you're writing from the comfort of your western home about a country like Cuba, that's really the only way you can do it. And at least Wixon based it on her own experiences; the book doesn't pretend to be something it isn't. So while I found the writing to be a bit formulaic at times and Alysia's perspective to be confoundingly white east-coast affluent conservative, the journey into the heart of Havana's people was profound, enlightening and highly enjoyable.

I'd still love to read something written by a Cuban author, though, if anyone has any recommendations...?

Joseph says

Was an interesting look at what people will do to survive in a country run by sex tourism. I could relate to the main character's lack of relating to both her cuban heritage and her american heritage. interesting read.

Alicia says

This was not an easy to read book about the jineteras (call girls for foreign tourists) in Cuba. They are educated, some are doctors, but find the best way to make real money (not Cuban "chavitos" or CUC, which are almost worthless)from the world wide tourist trade.

Dylan Vernon says

Excellent for a first novel. Gives a very realistic down to earth view of life in Cuba...with a focus on the challenges of the sex economy. Also good for those of us with an interest in 'finding your family' stories.

Erin says

A seriously interesting and surprising look at life in modern Cuba. Told from the perspective of a young American woman living in Havana on a student visa while searching for her father. Gritty and funny and sad

and hopeful.

Laura says

Although the writing style is sometimes melodramatic, the setting and the central issue (highly-educated Cuban women who are forced to turn to prostitution, or sex tourism, to survive) makes this an important and interesting novel.

Cheryl Schmidt says

I really enjoyed this - perhaps because Paul and I travelled around Cuba a few years ago, living with the locals, and saw a small window into the "real" Cuba, and so much was as the book portrays it. A people very proud of their country, and yet so poor and missing so many basics.
