

Literary Biography

Daína Chaviano

Daína Chaviano was born in Havana, Cuba. In 1979 she was awarded the David Prize for Science Fiction for *Los mundos que amo* (*The Worlds I Love*), a collection of stories she authored between the ages of 15 and 19. It was the first time a literary contest for science fiction – primarily a male genre – was held on the island. Thus, the fact that the winner was a young, female student came as a surprise. The book was adapted for radio and served as the inspiration for a short independent film, while a photonovel version sold 200,000 copies in less than two months.

After earning her bachelor's degree in English at the University of Havana, she began working as a literary and cultural consultant. In 1982 she established the first science fiction literary workshop in Cuba, and possibly in Latin America, which she called "Oscar Hurtado," in honor of the father of this genre on the island. While directing the workshop, she also hosted a radio program called «El universo de la música» (The Musical Universe), featuring pieces with mythological, mystery, and science fiction themes. By that time, she published the first anthology on Hurtado's work titled *Los papeles de Valencia el Mudo* (*The Manuscripts of Valencia the Mute*).

Soon before she had published her second book, *Amoroso planeta* (*Loving Planet*) a collection of tales where the author began her exploration of one of her future leitmotifs—the fusion of science fiction and mythology.

In 1985, she began writing TV scripts, adapting fairy tales for the program «Había una vez» («Once upon a time»), aimed mainly at children. And that summer she hosted a TV program dedicated to science-fiction films.



In 1986 her volume *Historias de hadas para adultos* (*Fairy Tales for Adults*) was released. This book set the standard for what would become her definitive style: science fiction in which parapsychology, the supernatural, and magic, in combination with the complexity of human relations, invites readings with a philosophical or social background. During that same year, Chaviano left her job as literary consultant in order to devote herself exclusively to writing her books and TV scripts.

In 1988, when her novel *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* (*Tales of an Extraterrestrial Grandmother*) was published, even the most conservative critics immediately recognized its importance as a seminal work of Latin American literature in that genre. Its original structure (developed as three parallel, alternating stories), the language (different for each one), and the cinematographic tone of the action, carried it to first place on the Cuban best-seller list. This time, the philosophical base of the plot was the interaction between magic, science and religion: another cornerstone in her literary work. Just as she does in later works—even those that aren't science-fiction—, Chaviano summons phenomena that can be explained in opposite ways (science vs. magic), but whose external manifestations can be similar... Their fusion, at least her way of handling it, turns out to be captivating and eludes any and all clichés.

In 1989 she edited an anthology, *Joyas de la ciencia-ficción* (*Science Fiction Gems*, Gente Nueva, 1989), with a prologue, notes, and translations by the anthologist. This volume includes stories by authors from various latitudes.

In 1990 Chaviano won the “13 de marzo” National Prize, sponsored by the University of Havana, for Best Literary Screenplay. The script, co-written with independent film director Tomás Piard, was based on her short story “La anunciación” (*The Annunciation*), from the volume *Amoroso planeta* (*Loving Planet*). By this time, Chaviano had already acted in several films by the same director. Her acting work in the short films *La barrera* (*The Barrier*) and *En la noche* (*At Night*) received praise from critics like Arturo Arias Polo: “It’s been some time since someone with such a suggestive and wide range of expression was featured in Cuban cinema”. Piard used her once again as muse/main character in another film produced by Cuban TV: *Adorable fantasma* (*Lovely Ghost*). It was her last appearance on the screen.

That same year, *El abrevadero de los dinosaurios* (*The Dinosaurs’ Watering Hole*) was released. This book consists of seventy tales of such unorthodox structure that they still defy classification. A mixture of fantasy and utopia, parable and humor,



this title immediately became a favorite. This book goes beyond the character of a divertimento and delves into the taboos, alternatives and prejudices of society.

Months later, *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre* was published in German, earning Chaviano the Anna Seghers Prize, sponsored by the Academy of Arts in Berlin.

Also in 1990, the author received the “La Edad de Oro” National Prize for Children’s and Young Adult Literature for her collection of fantasy tales *País de dragones* (*Land of Dragons*).

In early 1991, prompted by an invitation by the University of Quito (Ecuador) to deliver a series of lectures on literature and screenwriting, the author decided to leave the island permanently; thus, the publication of *País de dragones* was canceled in Cuba. *La Nueva Ola: relatos de ciencia-ficción* (*The New Wave: Science Fiction Tales*), a voluminous anthology edited and translated by Chaviano, also remained unpublished, as well as her prologues to several classics, including Michael Ende’s *The Neverending Story*, Mika Waltari’s *The Egyptian*, Tolstoy’s *Vampires*, and *The Virgin and the Gypsy* by D.H. Lawrence.

In May 1991 Chaviano established residence in Miami. Between 1991 and 1993 she worked as a translator, reporter, and columnist for El Nuevo Herald.

Before arriving in the United States, Chaviano had developed the idea for a novel with parapsychological subject, but her journalism work did not allow her time to pursue this project fully. In 1993 she decided to quit her job and devote herself entirely to writing for nearly two years. Thus she was able to complete *Gata encerrada* (*Cat in a Cage*) and *Casa de juegos* (*House of Games*), an erotic and surrealist novel, the first two books of «The Occult Side of Havana» series, whose central focus is a rarefied Havana, sometime real and sometimes ghostly, where anything might happen.

No publisher took an interest in these books. Nevertheless, Chaviano continued writing, completing the third novel in the series, *El hombre, la hembra y el hambre* (*Man, Woman, and Hunger*), for which she won the Azorín Prize for Best Novel in 1998, one of the most important awards in Spanish literature. The novel was published within months. As a result, *Casa de juegos* was published in 1999, while *Gata encerrada* appeared in 2001.

That same year, Espasa Juvenil presented *País de dragones*, with illustrations by Constante (Rapi) Diego. Rondalera, a small publishing house in Caracas (Venezuela), had already launched this book in 1997, with illustrations by



Heriberto Escobar. *País de dragones* was reprinted several times in Venezuela but remained unknown in the rest of the Hispanic world until the Spanish edition was released in 2001. More than ten years had gone by since the book was awarded the «La Edad de Oro» Prize. The new Spanish edition contained three new tales not included in the original.

In March 2003, Océano (Mexico) launched *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*. This book earned the author the Goliardos International Award for Fantasy, bestowed by an organization of Mexican writers and critics specializing in fantasy and science fiction to the most outstanding practitioners of these genres worldwide.

In 2004, she was the Guest of Honor at the 25th Annual Conference for the Fantastic in the Arts (Fort Lauderdale, Florida). Considered the most important academic fantasy & sci-fi convention in the world, it receives each year dozens of scholars, editors and writers who discuss and analyze the many faces of fantasy. It was the first time that such a distinction was awarded to a Spanish speaking author.

In 2006 Grijalbo (Random House Mondadori) published in Spain *La isla de los amores infinitos* (*The Island of Eternal Love*), the fourth volume of «The Occult Side of Havana» series. This work received the Gold Medal for Best Spanish Language Book (Florida Book Awards 2006). With editions in 25 languages, *The Island of Eternal Love* has become the most widely translated Cuban novel of all time.

