



BOOKS

Cuban 'ghost' writer regaining his legacy

BY BRETT SOKOL

Special to The Miami Herald

Few literary tragedies are so heartbreaking as the life of Guillermo Rosales. Literary tragedies don't come any more heartbreaking than the life of Guillermo Rosales. By the beginning of the 1970s, Rosales was only in his early 20s, yet he already had earned an enviable reputation among his fellow dissident Cuban novelists, all blacklisted by Fidel Castro's government.

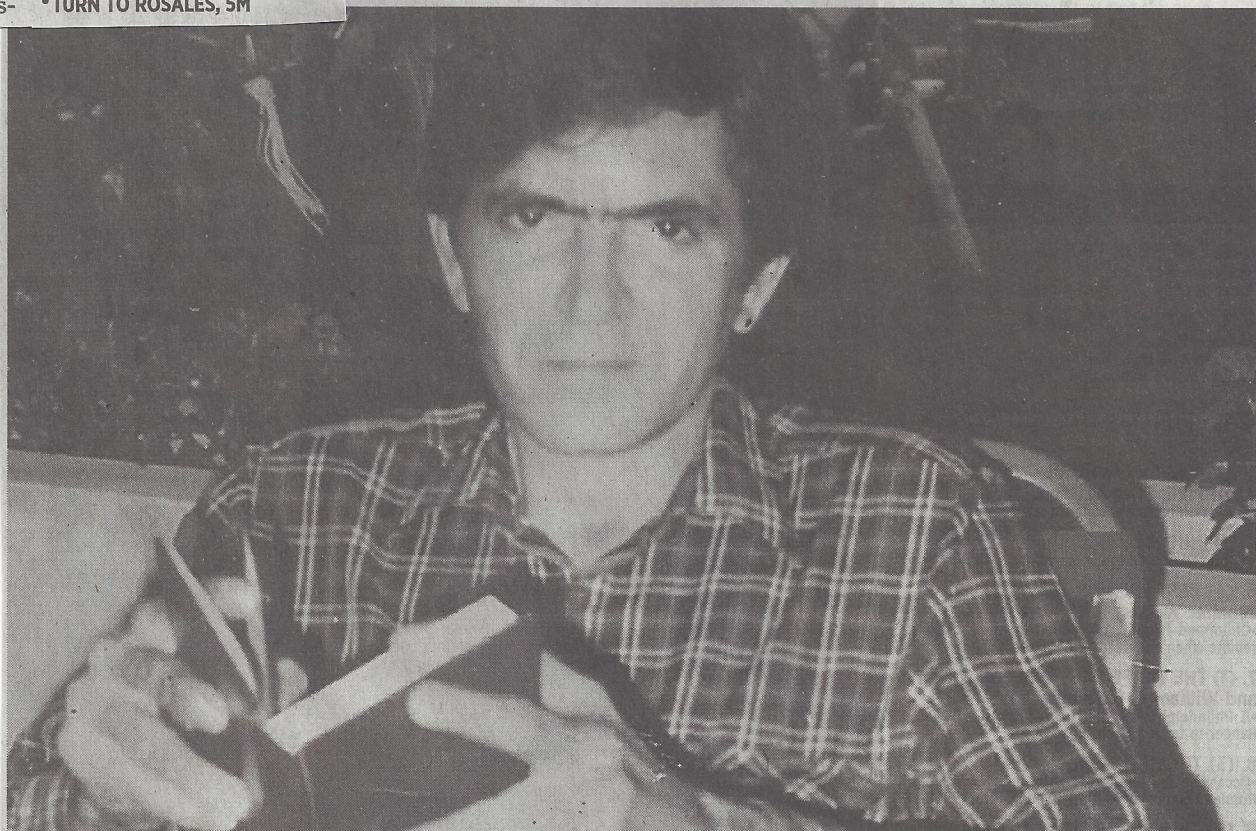
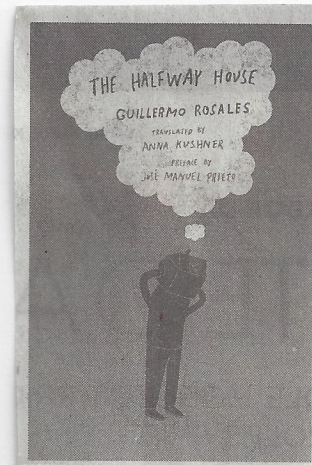
Reinaldo Arenas accords Rosales almost mythic status in his memoir *Before Night Falls*, discussing his writing at clandestine Havana salons, borrowing his typewriter (mere posses-

sion of such an object was enough to inspire police suspicion), and gazing admiringly as Rosales, perched on his bedroom balcony, waited patiently while Arenas feverishly banged out a fresh chapter for him to read.

Yet Rosales remained unknown beyond the Cuban cognoscenti. His younger sister Leyma recalls that as the years wore on, "He grew tired and disillusioned. He didn't feel there was anything remaining for him in Cuba. The system broke him down and kept him down until he left."

But Rosales' arrival in Miami in 1980, where he

• TURN TO ROSALES, 5M



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEYMA ROSALES

TROUBLED MAN: Guillermo Rosales in Miami, circa 1990; he died in 1993 at age 47.

suffered from schizophrenia and was subsequently in and out of hospital psychiatric wards, hardly changed matters. Despite being championed by Arenas, Carlos Victoria, and many of the other leading lit figures among the "Mariel generation," Rosales continued to labor in obscurity. On July 6, 1993, he destroyed many of his unpublished manuscripts, and then, sitting inside his tiny Little Havana apartment, put a gun to his head. He was 47.

Fortunately, thanks to new English translations, Rosales' reputation finally appears on the verge of transcending mere cult-dom.

First up is *The Halfway House* (New Directions, \$14.95 in paper), originally published in 1987 after a jury led by Octavio Paz, who would win the Nobel Prize for literature three years later, selected it for the University of Miami-sponsored Golden Letters prize.

NIGHTMARE STAY

An autobiographical novel based on Rosales' nightmarish stay in a *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*-styled group home in Little Havana, *The Halfway House* is as critical of *el exilio* as it is of Havana. Like Rosales, its narrator is a Cuban author whose work has fallen afoul of the Communist party's cultural commissars. Miami beckons and, spiritually adrift and physically ailing, he goes.

"There were some relatives waiting for me here who didn't know anything about my life and who, after twenty years of separation, barely knew me anymore," the narrator reports. "They thought a future winner was coming, a future businessman, a future playboy, a future family man who would have a future house full of kids, and who would go to the beach on weekends and drive fine cars and wear brand-name clothing. . . . The person who turned up at the airport the day of my arrival was

instead a crazy, nearly toothless, skinny, frightened guy who had to be admitted to a psychiatric ward that very day."

The narrator's fellow group-home residents are similar "human wrecks," the shattered remains of Cuban communism, caught between two worlds, unable to find a firm purchase on reality and preyed upon by their countrymen — sometimes for money, sometimes for sheer sport. Soon, the narrator finds himself joining in the cruelty, alternately stealing from and brutalizing his housemates. The process feels eerily familiar to "one who lived twenty years within the revolution, as its victimizer, witness, victim."

APT COMPARISON

In a preface, Cuban-exile novelist José Manuel Prieto compares Rosales to the celebrated Czech-exile novelist Milan Kundera, citing a similar focus on the psychic blowback of life under communism — particularly for those true believers who eventually break with the passions of their youth. The comparison is apt.

In *The Halfway House*, Rosales' alter ego turns on a TV set to watch enviously as a vapid *salsero*, blissfully ignorant of ideology, croons a love song:

"He'll never feel his heart go 'crack' in the face of an idea in which he firmly and desperately believed. . . . He'll never know what the machinery is. He'll never know."

Rosales also shares Kundera's surreal sense of black humor, particularly as he delivers *The Halfway House's* most lingering message:

"I dreamt that I was in

Havana again, in a funeral parlor on Calle 23. I was surrounded by numerous friends. We were drinking coffee. All of a sudden, a white door opened and in came a casket on the shoulders of a dozen wailing women. One of my friends elbowed me in the ribs and said, 'They're bringing in Fidel Castro.' We turned around. The old ladies placed the coffin in the middle of the room and left, weeping hysterically. Then the coffin opened. Fidel stuck a hand out first. Then the top half of his body. Finally all of him emerged. He smoothed his full-dress uniform and approached us, a smile on his face. 'Isn't there any coffee for me?' he asked. Somebody gave him a cup. 'Well, we're already dead,' Fidel said. 'Now you'll see that doesn't solve anything, either.'"

The kicker here is aimed squarely at those who blithely imagine that Cuba's transition to democracy — and a reconciliation with those across the Florida Straits — will follow smoothly on the heels of the so-called "biological solution." The history of pain and betrayal can hardly be papered over, any more than the death of Stalin erased the miseries of the gulags, or the death of Mao wiped away the horrors of China's Cultural Revolution. With rapprochement between Cuba and the U.S. government currently on the agenda (in Washington if not in Miami), Rosales' warning couldn't be more timely.

SISTER'S MEMORIES

That legacy is bitter-sweet to Leyma Rosales, who didn't arrive in Miami until the year after her brother died. Nine years younger, she still recalls their final face-to-face conversation back in Havana in late 1979. Guillermo had told his family he was leaving for Miami, and she desperately tried to talk him out of going. Because their father was serving in Cuba's diplomatic corps, Guillermo's departure was as much a

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Below, the writer in Cuba in 1976.



by Havana's stifling repression and by what he decried as Miami's crass materialism. As his health issues worsened in the early '90s, his response was increasingly to isolate himself, hunkering down with his writing, rejecting the entreaties of friends.

Referring to her brother's schizophrenia, Leyma says, "I know he was diagnosed with a mental illness. But I think that rather than being a mentally ill person, he suffered the symptoms of an ill modern society, the alienation from all the traditional, old, bureaucratic values that characterized the last — and still portray this — century. He suffered a chronic hunger to be heard through his only vehicle of expression: Literature."

On that subject, at least, one can easily see why Rosales may have felt at his wit's end.

Though his debut novel *Saturday's Glory, Sunday's Resurrection* was a finalist for Cuba's 1968 Casa de las Americas award (an annual springboard to national literary stardom), Rosales told his sister that several judges objected to its lack of leftist fervor at a moment when glorifying the death of Che Guevara was deemed paramount. Moreover, threaded into its playful recollections of pre-adolescent escapades were subtle critiques of mindlessly cruel children

and hypocritically careerist adults. Coupled with Rosales' increasingly outspoken manner, the parallels clearly ranked state officials. Though slated for publication by the Cuban Book Institute in early 1969, the novel never appeared. (It was published posthumously in 1994 by Miami's Ediciones Universal as *El juego de la Viola*; New Directions plans an English translation in 2010.)

Soon Rosales was practically a non-entity.

"That's the way it works," sighs Alejandro Ríos, a coordinator of the Spanish-language program for Miami Book Fair International. "Even though I worked at the Cuban Book Institute from 1970 to 1992" — when Ríos defected to Miami — "I never knew Guillermo Rosales even existed. This was someone whose name was

deleted from every dictionary of literature. He was a 'ghost' writer, erased from the very culture he came from."

Ríos discovered *The Halfway House* after reaching Miami. Its effect was revelatory.

"In the future, this is a book that we will have to go back to find out what happened." Historians, Ríos says, will only be able to provide the raw facts.

"We'll know that in Cuba there was a dictatorship for over 50 years. But what about the consequences of this dictatorship in the heart of someone? You can find the answer in this book."

With no small irony, Rosales' name has finally reappeared in Cuba's state-run media. After recent reissues of his work drew rave reviews in Spain and France, an official with UNEAC, Cuba's official union of writers and artists, gave an interview in which he praised *The Halfway House*, describing it simply as a stirring critique of the U.S. health-care system. Such an Orwellian move is akin to calling *Moby Dick* an attack on the whaling industry. And proof that Rosales' writing remains as relevant as ever.

sharp political statement as a personal break.

"What are you going to do in that country?" Leyma recalls pleading. "It has nothing to offer you as a writer, as a human being! You have a different perspective. How are you going to share your talent with those people there?"

Voice breaking, and no doubt reminded of her youthful illusions, she continues: "When I finally got to read *The Halfway House* I realized I was so wrong! It's a scream for awareness — and it could only have been written in America."

That much is certainly true. But Rosales also considered himself a "double exile," equally disgusted