



Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy

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In his 2003 National Book Award-winning memoir *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, Carlos Eire narrated his coming of age in Cuba just before and during the Castro revolution. That book literally ends in midair as eleven-year-old Carlos and his older brother leave Havana on an airplane--along with thousands of other children--to begin their new life in Miami in 1962. It would be years before he would see his mother again. He would never again see his beloved father.

Learning to Die in Miami opens as the plane lands and Carlos faces, with trepidation and excitement, his new life. He quickly realizes that in order for his new American self to emerge, his Cuban self must "die." And so, with great enterprise and purpose, he begins his journey.

We follow Carlos as he adjusts to life in his new home. Faced with learning English, attending American schools, and an uncertain future, young Carlos confronts the age-old immigrant's plight: being surrounded by American bounty, but not able to partake right away. The abundance America has to offer excites him and, regardless of how grim his living situation becomes, he eagerly forges ahead with his own personal assimilation program, shedding the vestiges of his old life almost immediately, even changing his name to Charles. Cuba becomes a remote and vague idea in the back of his mind, something he used to know well, but now it "had ceased to be part of the world."

But as Carlos comes to grips with his strange surroundings, he must also struggle with everyday issues of growing up. His constant movement between foster homes and the eventual realization that his parents are far away in Cuba bring on an acute awareness that his life has irrevocably changed. Flashing back and forth between past and future, we watch as Carlos balances the divide between his past and present homes and finds his way in this strange new world, one that seems to hold the exhilarating promise of infinite possibilities and one that he will eventually claim as his own.

An exorcism and an ode, *Learning to Die in Miami* is a celebration of renewal--of those times when we're certain we have died and then are somehow, miraculously, reborn.

Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy Details

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Olivia says

In an earlier update I promised I would review this book so here I am. I really hate this book but I will do my best to keep my review short as possible.

I'm an absolute sucker for immigrant/refugee stories. I always enjoy seeing people who've come from less than desirable situations rise to the top and pursue the American dream. As this book was also an autobiography I thought I would give it a try.

Background: Carlos Eire and his brother, Tony were airlifted out of Cuba during Operation Peter Pan in which thousands of Cuban children were relocated to the US. The book chronicles Carlos' first days in the US all the way up until he is married with children.

Writing an honest autobiography takes courage. Eire does not hold back on his feelings/actions both good and bad. For that I applaud him. However, I still think he is a jerk.

Within the first few days in the US he already exhibits very selfish behavior. Eire immediately tries to erase (in his words "kill") his Cuban identity. He changes his name to Charles and does everything he can to forget about Cuba - even refusing to write to his parents who are frantically worrying if their children are alive and well. Despite his parents worry he disregards them and even insults them (and no he was not slightly annoyed with them as we all can be with out parents, he was beyond cruel and in my opinion extremely vile to people who did nothing but love him unconditionally). He just cuts them out off his life for good with no explanation and has no guilt in doing so.

Carlos now Charles becomes increasingly materialistic. All he can think about is material objects and how much we Americans owe him for coming to the US (you're the one we took in pal, not the other way around so show some gratitude). I was also annoyed at just how many times he was willing to throw people under the bus to get what he wanted. In several parts of the book he resorts to bullying behavior as a means to rise to the top. This showed me that he lacked any kind of moral compass.

In addition to Charles' bullying behavior his use of foul language in both English and Spanish becomes increasingly common. While I can put up with foul language if it is essential to the character or story (you'd be surprised at just how a swear word here and there really makes a difference to a character's identity), I'd prefer that the author only do it when necessary. Eire just says the words for the sake of shock value. While many of the curse words are in Spanish (a language I am proficient in) they are still just as bad, if not worse than the English words (this would be somewhat hard to explain since many of the words used do not have a direct English equivalent). This in no way advanced the plot and furthered my dislike of Charles.

This next part might not bother everyone but it did bother me: Eire's disparaging remarks toward religion. As a Catholic I recognize that not everyone has the same beliefs as me and I respect that. However, I believe that whatever beliefs a person has (or in some cases doesn't have) need to be respected. The way Eire just disrespected religion time and time again really added nothing to the story and probably offended some readers such as myself (ironically I discovered that he is a well respected professor of religion at several universities).

Eire like many immigrants does encounter several hardships such as living in less than ideal foster homes and struggling to make ends meet (if I remember correctly he may have even qualified for welfare benefits).

And for those reasons my heart goes out to him. But I do not think that his hardships justify his immoral behavior.

So if you want to read this book then be my guest but just know that the author is an unsympathetic jerk with no sense of right and wrong.

WarpDrive says

It was sort of an OK book, but it just did not click.

Seemed to me pretty artificial, and pretty underwhelming too. Stopped reading it half-way.

Linda says

I just finished the first volume in Carlos Eire's memoirs, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*. I had to purchase this book right away to learn more about how Eire went from a privileged life in Cuba, to living in an impoverished immigrant neighborhood on the North Side of Chicago, to go on to become a Professor at Yale.

I've now finished this second volume of Eire's memoirs. He writes from deep within his soul of the emotional difficulty of adjusting to life in the US and the many challenges he faces on his road to a PhD in History and Religious Studies. He is first placed in a foster home with a decent Jewish family in Miami. However, he and his brother then are placed in the "Palace Ricardo", a very squalid (actually dangerous) foster home in a very poor part of Miami. The small house is populated, in addition to other foster children, by rats and roaches. The foster parents are abusive. Finally, Eire and his brother are transferred to his Uncle Amado and his family in Bloomington, Illinois. Here some semblance of normalcy returns. It takes Eire's mother 3 years to reach the US. He and his brother then move to a very poor neighborhood, Uptown, on the north side of Chicago. There are flash forwards to events later in his life which I hope will be further developed in a future volume of memoirs.

The methods Eire uses to survive the adversities of his life as a Cuban refugee show a deep intellect and spirituality. He studies hard, works hard, and manages to succeed where many have fallen into a sense of despair and hopelessness. He writes of his fear of being home along, his panic / anxiety attacks, and his ability to overcome all of this. I loved his description of experiencing his first snowfall, while living in Bloomington. He loves nature and takes solace in the simplest things, such as watching the leaves turn in the fall or spotting his first Cardinal. He expresses his feelings with honesty and eloquence.

Maria Puig says

The flash backs, forward, sideways, ups and downs drive me a little nuts toward the end. For someone who gave us so much detail of his 9 months living with Ricky and Lucy in Miami he sure omitted a lot toward the end of the book. Because there are no 4.5 stars I'll give him 5. His first one is his masterpiece and even though this one fell short half a star I still loved it. Swoosh!!

Paul Schulzetenberg says

Disclaimer: I have a distant personal connection to this author.

I really liked the first of Eire's books, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, and I eagerly looked forward to this book. This book chronologically picks up right where *Snow* left off, as Eire lands in Miami after his flight from Cuba. But make no mistake, this is not a rehash of *Snow*, nor should it be.

Snow is a charming book told with dark undertones, *Die* is a darker book told with charming undertones. This grows organically from the topic being discussed; after all, this is about the loss of innocence, both the natural innocence of childhood and also the innocence of the rosy picture of the United States. Eire experiences both subtle and overt racism, as well as abject poverty, both of which have a tendency to eliminate any innocence you might have remaining.

But the thing which makes this book most fascinating is that Eire succeeds, despite adversity. In many ways, Eire is the embodiment of the American Dream: He arrived in America in poverty as an immigrant with poor English skills, but drew on industriousness and natural talent to climb the social ladder. In the end, he makes it all the way up to one of the classic positions of entrenched society, that of professor at Yale. The American Dream as literary device is overused to the point of cliché, and it's easy to get crotchety and dismissive. But, sometimes, it actually happens, and when written realistically, as here, it is impressive.

Magna Diaz says

A book that brings us into the life of a child immigrant brought to America in 1961 for a better life and to await for his parents to leave Cuba. Carlos Eire the author, recounts how after Castro took over Cuba things began to change for the worse everyone. The United States brought 1400 Cuban children to US soil. The plan was to place these children in foster homes as they awaited for their parents to leave Cuba and reclaim them. However, Fidel Castro closed down all exits from Cuba. Life for Carlos and his older brother took a turn for the worse. Many years would pass before his parents would find a way out and during that time Carlos would be go through many changes as he search for his identity.

Told with humor, this biography give the reader a view into the life of an immigrant child and all the horrors that he and his brother went through. They survived with many scars. A must read!

Deedie Gustavson says

These two memoirs (also read "*Waiting for Snow in Havana*") were excellent. I had never heard of Operation Pedro Pan, which airlifted 14000 Cuban children to the US in 1962.

Catherine says

Carlos Eire's first memoir, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, ends with Carlos (age 11) and his brother Tony (14) departing Havana as part of Operation Pedro Pan in 1962, while their parents stay behind awaiting permission to leave. This coming of age memoir begins as the plane lands in Miami. Carlos and Tony are first placed in separate private homes, both with Jewish families who treat them very well. When their

parents' planned departure from Cuba is put on hold, the refugee authorities send the boys to a chaotic and often brutal group home run by a Cuban couple. After nine months there, a social worker suddenly remembers they were supposed to be sent to Illinois to live with their uncle and his family, which is where they go until the arrival of their mother in 1965.

Tony resists learning English and adapting to the US. Carlos tries desperately to fit in and leave everything about Cuba behind. When their mother finally comes to the US, he experiences a great deal of ambivalence about being parented after so many years of near freedom. The book moves seamlessly between their early years in America and the events of the future – this is done really well, as if retelling the early story brings up additional memories of what happened later. Eire's poetic/hyperbolic/wry writing style conveys perfectly the emotions felt by both boys and how differently siblings can respond to similar situations.

Jane(Pixie) says

I enjoyed the audio. Wonder what Mr Eire accent is like? Time well spent.

Lila Vogt says

I have read *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, so was familiar with Eire's work. This memoir is incredible. I had no idea that over 14,000 children were airlifted out of Cuba in the early 1960's, some as young as 3. Parents were desperate to get their children to a safe haven, hoping to be able to follow them. Many were never reunited, such as Carlos' father, who died in Cuba before being able to secure passage to leave. After 3 years, his mother was finally able to escape Fidel's Rule. He refers to post-Castro Cuba as Castrolandia.

Many were farmed out to orphanages, foster homes and far-flung relatives. It is a riveting tale and as familiar as I thought I was with the history of Cuba, this was a real eye opener.

The narrative is compelling, but Eire's use of language is lyrical. I highly recommend this read!

Ann says

A continuation of Carlos Wire's story started in "Waiting for Snow in Havana" about his leaving Cuba as one of the 14,000 Pedro Pan children airlifted to the USA.

Although this was fairly engaging and I do feel great sympathy/empathy for what he endured as a child separated from his parents, in a land where everything was different and he must transform himself, from "Carlos" into "Chuck", I still had a lot of frustration with the book. First of all, I felt that he was capitalizing on the success of the "Snow" book. I suspect his agent probably encouraged him to write more on the subject.

Second, he constantly jumped around with thoughts, time frames, incidents and his interest in religion. It made me dizzy at times, trying to keep up with the whats, whens, wheres and whos!!

Third, he refers back to the first book without much explanation -- so if you have not read "Snow", you are

in trouble. (For example he immediately begins to talk about Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. If you have not read "Snow", you don't realize that he is talking about his parents.)

Fourth, he omits so many issues which were at the heart of his experience. What was it like being reunited with his mother after all those years and all that wishing and hoping?

Finally -- so much of the book, Like "Snow" is stream of consciousness pain. I hope he is working on this in therapy -- or will consider getting therapy if he is not yet doing so.

Nicole says

Fantastic memoir. Loved every page. Well written an understatement. Flows effortlessly back and forth through time - tying everything in- in a way that transcends time. Amazing what children, people, endure, and how they can continue on, overcome, and even shine. I loved this book.

Fran Wilkins says

Well written memoir about being a Cuban exile. The title refers to the author needing his Cuban self to die in order to become American. It is both sad and inspiring. America is seen as the land of opportunity and while that works for some it is rough road with little opportunity for others. Thoughtful and real, Eire experiences many deaths of himself as he is shuffled through foster care homes, different schools, and different cities.

Caroline says

I honestly feel like I could have Carlos Eire sit in a McDonalds for a few hours, write an essay about his experience, and I would end up with a piece of writing that I would find totally beautiful and engrossing and profound. I love his style and prose that much.

Learning to Die in Miami picks roughly where *Waiting for Snow in Havana* leaves off: Carlos and his brother Tony's arrival in Florida after the Pedro Pan airlifts. The style is almost identical to the one Eire used in his first book, which means basically that I savored each and every page.

Though I gave the first book a 5-star rating, this one gets a 4-star, only due to the fact that it didn't have the advantage of being a wonderful unexpected surprise as I read; this time I knew what I was getting. Don't get me wrong - this is in no way a bad thing. Rather, I appreciate the consistency, but it did mean that it didn't have the same twinkly newness and awesomeness that the first book did.

An additional difference between the two is simply the subject matter. I felt that in some ways, *Waiting for Snow* was a love letter to his wonderful childhood in Cuba. While It contained some dark and difficult memories, it also was full of laughter and sun and family. In general, there was a lot less of all of those things in *Learning to Die*. And, though I did miss the occasional moments of levity in this book, I get why they weren't there. Learning to die and be reborn in a new country, trying to make a new life and home for yourself - it's not really a lighthearted process.

One thing I did very much enjoy about this book was learning more about Eire's relationship with his religion. It was something I wondered about often as I was reading *Waiting for Snow* and I felt like many of my questions were answered. Eire's religion is an integral part of his story, and it weaves its way into most of the book.

I will end on kind of a personal side note, but one that definitely added to my enjoyment of the book. I was fortunate enough to get to hear Eire speak about this book when it came out. He told us that he was inspired to write the book while in Prague, where he had seen advertisements for the Museum of Communism. Well, I happened to read *Waiting for Snow* while in Prague, and while I was there, I went to the Museum of Communism. Kind of random and of no real consequence, but I got a kick out of it.

Jay says

Learning to Die in Miami: Confessions of a Refugee Boy is primarily about how the author dealt with the pain and joy of leaving the old and embracing the new. This was the plight of Carlos Eire when he was sent by his parents from Cuba to Florida after Castro took power. Unlike many who refused to adapt, thinking they would soon return to Cuba, Eire made every effort to cope with the challenges of his several involuntary moves. Having had many previous childhood experiences in Cuba, Eire relished the opportunity to pursue new dreams through persistence and hard work in the U.S.

Although he made some mistakes and dealt with several almost unbearable situations, he prospered in each new environment and eventually became a professor of history and religion at Yale University. Eire's many moves resulted in the death of the old and the re-creation of the new. Eire accomplished each transformation by re-branding himself with new perspectives and altered names.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, possibly more so than his first about his previous life before moving to Florida. Eire's rich narrative is an example for all who may consider writing a memoir, for he succeeded in combining past experiences with analysis based on his developing understanding of history, culture, language, religion, and life.
