

'The Cigar Roller': Up in Smoke

By Lenora Todaro

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THE CIGAR ROLLER By Pablo Medina. 178 pp. Grove Press. \$21.

CALL it deathbed lit -- a form stretching broadly from Tolstoy's "Death of Ivan Ilyich" to Michael Ondaatje's "English Patient," in which a bedridden protagonist takes the measure of his life in end-of-the-line ramblings, which range from sweet recall to lonely yearning, usually through flashback and interior monologue.

"The Cigar Roller," the third novel by the Cuban exile, poet and memoirist Pablo Medina, brings the form to the Cuban expatriate community in Florida. The book is set in the middle of the 20th century; Amadeo Terra lies paralyzed from a stroke, assumed brain-dead, in a hospital. With his body condemned to the purgatory of immobility, his mind charges to and fro within his memory. A respected cigar roller, a 300-pound philanderer, a joker and a smoker incapable of love, Terra finds himself reduced to hearing conversations about the stink of his "poo-poo." Forsaken by his two living sons, his wife dead, he speaks an impenetrable language of blinks and even drool with his small circle of attendants: Sor Diminuta, a nun with the "scent of a wild she-wolf," and the cantankerous staff members, who feed and bathe him with little regard for his raging internal existence.

Taste and smell link Terra's body to the world outside. His madeleine is the mango: "Yellow, pulpy, stringy, sticky yellow. Mango! He wants it, tubs of it, he wants all mango, mango day and mango night, mango moon and mango sun. . . . Mango, he yells with his eyes; mango, he begs, blinking yes." The taste of mango triggers memories of his homeland in the days before independence from Spain in 1898, of lust, of the death of his youngest son (the cause of which is dangled before the reader until the final pages), and of his mastery of the art of cigar rolling, which Medina explains expertly.

Medina's pet literary device in this novel is the list, which he rolls out in forms both poetic and prosaic: "He does not feel cold or hot, he feels light and dark . . . entrance and exit, thicket of thickets, thighs without end, pulpy fruit, sea breeze on his face, tongue and more tongue, trap, triumph, tact, burrow, cave, hole, wound. . . ." He works Terra's desperate attempts to communicate with blinks and spittle into harrowing riffs. And yet even paralyzed and slobbering, Terra remains an unsympathetic character. Medina makes him out to be a kind of godfather, akin to a mambo king, but in facing death he lacks the wisdom

of Tolstoy's Ivan and the colorful end-of-time relationships with supporting characters that Ondaatje provides his patient. Nurse, Nurse II and Orderly, Terra's impersonally named hospital attendants, act as little more than stagehands in Terra's drama. When he reflects on the events of his life, it appears that his mastery at rolling full-bodied cigars sits as the centerpiece on his shelf of pride. He has made his deepest connections with tobacco. ("If tobacco exists, then I exist.")

It's hard to tell whether Medina intends the Cuban cigar to symbolize old-time Cuba, machismo, ultimate pleasure or perfection -- possible when rolling a cigar, impossible when living a life, as Terra's recollections make abundantly clear. This novel has large themes: memory, forgetting and the underpinnings of character. Yet "The Cigar Roller" feels strangely small when compared with his previous novels. "The Marks of Birth" (1994) takes on the Cuban revolution and exile to Florida with great aplomb, while "The Return of Felix Nogara" (2000) grandly imagines one exile's return in the wake of the dictator's death. In those books, the layers of politics, history and personal drama combine to create measured, searching tales. "The Cigar Roller," while a fine portrait of a hedonist and a cad, shrinks beneath its limited protagonist, a man unwilling to look into the darkest corners of his life. Sometimes a cigar roller is just a cigar roller.

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