

When Cuban Meets Irish, it's Magic: *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*

By Oscar Hijuelos

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux; 484 pages; \$22

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Somewhere between the tender longing of *Our House in the Last World* and the melancholic sexuality of *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, Oscar Hijuelos has found the ingredients for a novel in which an intricate web of family relationships, spanning a century and several countries, draws the reader deeper and closer to the essence that is the Montez O'Brien clan. The Pulitzer Prize-winning Cuban-American (first American of Hispanic descent to do so) has successfully inscribed his epic with the photographic preciseness of Alfonso Arau and the magically textured baroque of Alejo Carpentier. *The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien*, among other things is a collection of many richly hued snapshots, each with a detailed description. Above all, it is a book about memory.

Memories of mist-ridden, emerald Ireland, or luscious, tropical Cuba, or unequivocally green Pennsylvania, the stuff that reality is made of for the Montez O'Brien clan. And a clan they are, jealously guarding each other and the integrity of the family at almost all cost. All seventeen of them, not including later spouses, children and grandchildren, are like contiguous frames of a movie, revealing the innermost movements in their deliciously buzzing Cuban-Irish sanctuary, in Cobbleton, Pennsylvania.

Nelson O'Brien, dreamer and soon-to-be family patriarch, comes from the land of St. Patrick and the *Ollam fili* to humble, straightforward Cobbleton. He is actually a photographer by trade. With the help of a venerable tripod-and-bellows camera, he captures fleeting stationary images which

escape into the oblivion of memory. He would one day explain to his son, to whom he wanted to bequeath both his passion and livelihood:

. . . this apparatus [the folding-bellows-type camera, with Thorton-Pickard shutter], in my opinion, captures not only the superficial qualities of its subjects but also, because of the time it takes to properly collect light, their feelings, as they settle on the subject's expressions: sadness and joy and worry, with variations therein, are collected on the plate. (Epilogue)

Nelson's love affair with pictures takes him to the limits of static portraiture and beyond to moving pictures. As proprietor of the Jewel Box Movie Theater he provides a narrow window of escape for all the local townspeople. As for himself, and later his son Emilio, there is no getting away. The latter, a fifteenth child, a much-wanted son, looks for happiness, unsuccessfully, in the nebulous distinction of the B movies. Having grown up in the limelight of the family business soaking in the 'classics,' he is later doomed to be exiled from them in Hollywood. For Nelson the images just flicker by, as do the years. There is a certain melancholy in a man who in his youth pursued innocent dreams that through the years turned around and put him on the run, like his dead sister's memory.

A tall, noble-looking Irishman, whose smiling public face gives way to a more

somber reflection when in the privacy of his own home, in the company of his best friend, liquor. He repeatedly sighs, as if something were missing in his life, even when fourteen times the fecund air of his home is broken with the newborn cry of yet another of his beautiful daughters, to whom he is intensely devoted. Even when Emilio is born, after 23 years of boy-filled intention, Nelson cannot comfortably respond to his masculine triumph in the sea of womanhood that is his home, a sentiment that would later plague his own son in his relations with other women. Hijuelos tells us as much from the very beginning.

The house in which the fourteen sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien lived radiated femininity. Men who passed by the white picket fence—the postman, the rag seller, the iceman—were sometimes startled by the strong scent of flowers, as if perfume had been poured onto the floorboards and ground. And when the door to the house—a rickety, many-roomed Victorian affair some few miles outside the small Pennsylvania town of Cobbleton, with teetering beams and rain-soaked clapboard façade (with gables, rusted hinges, and a fetid outhouse on a foundation that tended to creak during heavy rains, a roof that leaked, and with splintering surfaces everywhere)—when their door opened on the world, the power of these females, even the smallest infants, nearly molecular in its adamancy, slipped out and had its transforming effect upon men. (3)

The year is 1900. Mariela Montez, a subdued yet passionate Cuban beauty, reluctantly enters Nelson's studio and his life. Three years later we see her entering the

door to what would be her personal domain, the aging Victorian in Cobbleton, a world into which she brings fourteen daughters and a son. A space in which she seeks refuge from the outside, and especially from English. Spanish allows her the luxury of her own, private world, which she shares only sometimes with her older daughters, like Margarita.

They'd come to Cobbleton, whose streets were lined with thick oaks, hickories, maples, butternuts, and locust willows, trees that in the summers provided much shade. Her Cuban mother never knew the names of those trees. To her, Margarita imagined, they were simply trees, great decorative and flower-boughed ornaments that sprouted out of the ground, shedding leaves in the autumn, covered with snow and knobby tubes of ice in the winter, and returning in the spring—elms (*olmos*), oaks (*robles*), and white-barked birch trees (*abedul*) [sic], among others that she simply thought of as *árboles*, as in "Look at that pretty tree," her mother, if she knew them, keeping the Spanish equivalents of their names to herself. And she was the same way about the names of flowers, happy when there was an equivalent, *rosa* for "rose," but moving through their yard that would grow thick with *claveles*, *violetas*, *azucenas*, *flamenquillas*, *hibiscos*, and *botones de oro*, without knowing that in English they were called carnations, violets, lilies, marigolds, hibiscus, and buttercups. (50)

Mariela orchestrates the complicated enterprise of her ever-increasing household, with its endless meals, clothes and diapers.

As the oldest girls near adulthood they join forces with her in the daily chore of tending to children who throughout 23 years of parental fecundity have become so much younger, they could soon easily be their own. They derive the greatest pleasure from this, from contributing to the massive family project that is the Montez O'Brien clan. Everywhere abounds love and happiness, or so one would think, if it weren't for Mariela's incessant writing, hidden from all except a very special friend, Mr. Garcia. She, the mother of fifteen children, felt loneliness amidst the throng. A shred of paper hidden with all her notebooks would reveal that: "I am surrounded by life and yet feel alone, with open hands begging . . ." (426). And then there is Nelson's reticent and solitary drinking.

The year is 1898, 1943, 1994, or any of those in between. In the novel's hundred-year journey you visit Santiago de Cuba, Cassino, Italy, New York, Hollywood, Alaska, and even the Vatican, in a special audience with the Pope. As you meet the many members of the Montez O'Brien family, one-by-one (or sometimes two-by-two, as with the twins, Olga and Jacqueline), you will experience their triumphs and failures, sexual awakenings and spiritual longings. You can't help but chuckle as plump and succulent Irene finds a man to satisfy both her ravenous appetites, sweets and sex (in that order). You will cringe as

Margarita suffers humiliation at the hands of her first husband, the right and proper businessman who everyone thought was such a great catch. The shock and tears that Emilio shares with you when his "life" almost ends in a fiery tragedy, will give you a newly found respect for what seemed a gypsy's silly premonition. Each of the Montez O'Briens is a challenge; Maria, Gloria, Emilio and the others. Hijuelos helps us to explore each and every one of them, as individuals, and as smaller parts of the greater whole. Some you will lose track of as they disappear into "unmemory." Others will stay with you forever.

The Fourteen Sisters of Emilio Montez O'Brien is a journey forward with Margarita, whose very inheritance is this book of memories. Her entire life has been devoted to keeping the family together, organizing the album, as it were. As she dies we are led back to where the family started, to her own birth. Leaving her old and wrinkly body, she returns to the place her mother wrote about: "I want to be transported to a place where I will hear the hymn of sleeping birds, where streams flow with musical waters, and where I will find majestic trees in whose boughs I will hide my soul" (426). Her father takes a picture of a springtime rose in the vivid brilliant field the old Mennonite farmer always said was the work of the Lord. Read the book and you will see it too.