

# Leap In The Dark

News, views and reviews from an iconoclastic Canadian writer.

[« Bisphenol A: Birth Defects In A Can? | Main | Book Review: Skip by David Newsom »](#)

## Book Review: *La Revancha - Revenge* by Henry Eric Hernandez

History depends on the point of view of the person doing the telling, or as it's more popularly said, history is written by the winners. The funny thing about history is how easily it changes. You've been chugging along for years thinking one thing happened - well at least that was the way your father's father- father saw it happen when he was young.

So everybody thought it happened that way. Then one day some other people come along and they're telling the story in a completely different way. When you ask them who they know who was there,,nm who told their father's father that it happened that way, they just smile and laugh and say isn't that cute they have an oral tradition.

We don't know anybody who was there, we read about it in this book.

Was the book written by somebody who was there? Which you think is a reasonable question to ask. How can you write about something if you haven't seen it with your eyes or heard it told by someone who had been told by someone who had seen it with their eyes?

But they laugh again and say oh know this was written last year by an historian. If you let someone who had been there write about it they would be too emotionally involved to be able to discern what really happened. An historian is able to tell everybody a nice neat summary of the events.

Here we will show you. And they bring out a big shiny leather book with the words History of Men in big gold letters across the front. They open the book to a page somewhere in the middle and begin to read a story. Now it is your turn to laugh, and they stop. They look at you and say what is so funny that you are laughing so hard. This is history and it's serious business.

Well you, you wipe the tears from your eyes and say but that is wrong - your book doesn't know the story - it's a very funny story the way you tell it - it's a backward story. Well now they get really mad and say well you may think it's funny now buddy, but that's history and that's the way it happened. It says so right on the cover. People are going to believe the book and not somebody who was told about it by their father who heard it from his father and his father before him.

How do we know when we are living if we are part of history? Even if you're a soldier serving in a war do you have a sense that you are part of history, or are you simply trying to keep alive from moment to moment? Anyone who thinks of themselves in terms of history probably has too much power

over others.

Presidents and generals, leaders of industry, militant labour leaders, rebels both successful and failures; they all have their names recorded in the annals of history. But what about the people who served under all those leaders? The foot soldiers who carry out the orders of the President and General, the workers who sweated on the assembly line or starved during the strikes, or the desperate men and women who fought and died in the hope of changing their circumstances following the person they believe will give them a better world in the here and now.

Does anyone remember their names or even care? Not as one of the many, but as an individual like the leaders. Without people there can be no history, but history seems to be able to exist without the people who were responsible for it.

*La Revancha - Revenge* by Henry Eric Hernandez is a chronicle of his attempts to turn the tables on that notion of history. Through a process he refers to as Interventions he went about Cuba commemorating either a person or a place that played a part in its history but have been relegated to the shadows by neglect or official policy.

He makes it clear that this has nothing to do with Cuba politically, but is a comment on the nature of history everywhere. It's just that he happens to be a Cuban and have its history at his fingertips. The same process could be carried out in any country around the world. In Cuba it actually might have been easier due to the fact that poverty has forced many buildings that were once used for one purpose to now be seconded into a new function.

The book is a type of commentary, or narration even, of the histories that surrounded the sites involved with the interventions. Whether the story of the person whose body is being exhumed and honoured with a commemorative tomb or the derelict washroom being renovated in a school which at one time had served as an army base, they carry a history and a symbolism that reflects his objective.

Take for example the case of Columbia's Post # 6 which was the army base that saw the beginning of every revolutionary army's entrance into Havana and served notice of their having seized power. This was where Sgt, soon to make himself General Batista, led his force into power in late 1933. By 1936 the post had been turned into a full-fledged army base complete with airport and became the Headquarters of the army.

In 1952 when Batista again led a rebellion it was through the Columbia barracks that he entered the city. When Fidel's forces entered Havana, it was also through the portal offered by the base. It was also here that Castro had one of his political opponents arrested. Shortly after that it was decided to decommission the base and turn it into a school.

According to Hernandez's theory changing the identity of the building has gradually made its place in history forgotten. Instead there stood a symbol of the revolution's successful promise to bring literacy to the masses. But by the late 1990's the effects of continued poverty and insufficient funds

for education could be seen in the state of the building's washrooms.

Garbage strewn and looking like they aren't even remotely functional, it makes you wonder what the students of the school are using for facilities. In fact I wondered if there were even students. Hernandez's intervention in this case was a complete renovation of the washrooms. He rebuilt them and returned them all to working order. But in an added touch he worked into the tiles that run over the sinks pictures of both the state he had found the washrooms in, and the building's previous function as a military base.

So his renovation was to not only the physical aspects of the building but also its place in history. Now anyone coming in to use the bathroom can't help but know what has come before them and a small link to the past has been restored.

*Revenge* documents the series of interventions and the history behind each one them that Hernandez undertook over a period of a couple of years. Whatever the reasons for people and places to be omitted from histories record he has carefully assembled the stories that place them in their proper places in the timeline of Cuban history.

So in spite of what those guys said, sometimes history doesn't have to be written down in a book for it to be history. There is always some sort of record that can be found to exist, somebody who remembers what their great, great grandfather told their great grandfather and so on down the line.

History is a narrative made by the people, and only if their narrations are told can it be fully understood, says Kevin Power in his Introduction to this book. What Hernandez has done with *Revenge* is to tell five of those narrations as a way to fill in gaps in "official" Cuban history.

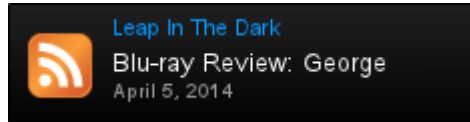
At times it is a challenging book in that it is hard to follow the author's jumps from story to story and back again. But one soon gets used to that pattern. What might be even harder for some people to understand is the concept he's expressing. We have all been conditioned to the notion that history is the actions of the powerful. Individual stories don't usually have a place inside that definition. After reading *La Revancha/Revenge* hopefully your opinion will be changed.

All of us are part of history; it's just a matter of fighting to hold on to it.

---

Posted by Richard Marcus on April 8, 2007 10:43 PM | [Permalink](#)





[↑ Grab this Headline Animator](#)

