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Witness to the Cuban experiment

Demetria Martinez | Oct. 7, 2009

Author humanizes a revolution all too often stereotyped by the U.S. press

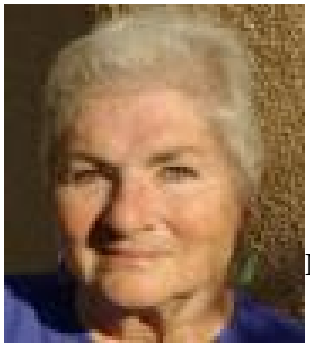
TO CHANGE THE WORLD: MY YEARS IN CUBA
By Margaret Randall
Published by Rutgers University Press, $24.95

Neither a superficial apology nor gratuitous attack, Margaret Randall?s memoir, *To Change the World*, looks at the Cuban revolution through the eyes of someone who was involved in every aspect of daily life for the 11 years she resided on that island nation.

A poet, photographer, oral historian, feminist and activist, Randall lived for almost a quarter-century in Latin America. Mexico City was her home during the tumultuous 1960s, when she coedited the influential literary journal *El Corno Emplumado* (*The Plumed Horn*). She participated in the Mexican student movement of 1968, and the following year political repression forced her into hiding. Eventually she escaped to Cuba, where she would live from 1969 to 1980 working, raising her four children, and taking part in that country?s struggle to build a revolutionary society.

Randall witnessed some of the young revolution?s most serious challenges and innovative social programs. Drawing on thousands of pages of old diaries, she evokes her children?s education, the many times her family benefited from expert and accessible health care, accounts of her job in publishing, and the neighborhood committees that defended a revolution under continuous attack from the United States.

In those years Cubans were experimenting with everything from sex education to a relationship with the Catholic church strained by the church?s refusal to accept black children into its schools and the revolutionary government?s dogmatic laws that ended up isolating people of faith. That relationship eased in the 1980s when, influenced by the power of liberation theology throughout the developing world, the Cuban Communist Party changed its attitude toward believers.

 No dogmatist herself, Randall explores the problems as well as the achievements of the Cuban experiment. She is critical of the revolution?s single-party rule, restrictive immigration policy, one-dimensional press, and unwillingness to allow meaningful dissent. On the other hand, she is deeply affected by its underlying values of justice and fairness. She tells moving stories of internationalism and collective work.

Cuba is an island only 90 miles from the United States. Isolation has helped reinforce revolutionary energy and defense even as it has separated the Cuban people from its closest neighbors and, to some extent, kept them frozen in time. Randall probes this and many other conditions specific to the Cuban experience. Chapter 13, ?A Question of Power,? explores the dangers inherent when a single man and his close associates hold power for almost half a century.

It is Randall?s ability to make the reader a part of her daily encounters that makes her memoir so engaging. Her writing humanizes a revolution all too often stereotyped by the U.S. mainstream press. The contradictions of the Cuban revolution are illustrated movingly by incidents in a mother?s daily life: her 4-year-old daughter?s dismay at the girls? version of a cowboy suit and the subsequent encounter with authorities over issues of sexism. Her own dismay when she was asked to judge a beauty contest, and the telling response of Haydee Santamaria, president of the Cuban cultural institution Casa de las Americas, to Randall?s questioning: ?I chose you precisely because I knew you would hate it, that you?d find a way to move us a bit closer to stopping those terrible contests. You did that. ... The armed struggle part of revolution is relatively easy. It is changing society, changing the old values and replacing them with new ones that is hard.?

To Change the World not only covers the years Randall spent in Cuba and the months leading up to them, it lays the groundwork for a considered examination of the Cuban situation today, ending in the last chapter with an expansive global political and societal analysis: ?I still believe in socialism; but today would like to see a version that honors a broader range of ideas, nurtures freedom of dissent, acknowledges difference, and seeks some formula which addresses individual identity as well as collective concerns.?

Randall?s personal story would have been a page turner in itself, but her choice to bear witness to the larger

struggle of the Cuban people at a time in history when many places in the world were engaged in the struggle for social justice makes for a riveting account that will undoubtedly stand the test of time.

Demetria Martinez is a frequent NCR *contributor.*

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