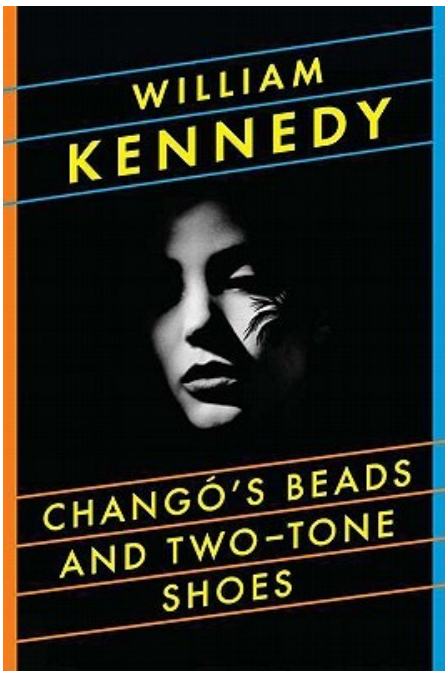


# Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes

*William Kennedy*

# Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes

*William Kennedy*

**Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes** William Kennedy
**Selected by *The New York Times Book Review* as a Notable Book of the Year From the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Ironweed*, a dramatic novel of love and revolution from one of America's finest writers.**

When journalist Daniel Quinn meets Ernest Hemingway at the Floridita bar in Havana, Cuba, in 1957, he has no idea that his own affinity for simple, declarative sentences will change his life radically overnight.

So begins William Kennedy's latest novel-a tale of revolutionary intrigue, heroic journalism, crooked politicians, drug-running gangsters, Albany race riots, and the improbable rise of Fidel Castro. Quinn's epic journey carries him through the nightclubs and jungles of Cuba and into the newsrooms and racially charged streets of Albany on the day Robert Kennedy is fatally shot in 1968. The odyssey brings Quinn, and his exotic but unpredictable Cuban wife, Renata, a debutante revolutionary, face-to-face with the darkest facets of human nature and illuminates the power of love in the presence of death.

Kennedy masterfully gathers together an unlikely cast of vivid characters in a breathtaking adventure full of music, mysticism, and murder-a homeless black alcoholic, a radical Catholic priest, a senile parent, a terminally ill jazz legend, the imperious mayor of Albany, Bing Crosby, Hemingway, Castro, and a ragtag ensemble of radicals, prostitutes, provocateurs, and underworld heavies. This is an unforgettably riotous story of revolution, romance, and redemption, set against the landscape of the civil rights movement as it challenges the legendary and vengeful Albany political machine.

## Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes Details

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Date | : | Published September 29th 2011 by Viking (first published September 1st 2011) |
| ISBN | : | 9780670022977 |
| Author | : | William Kennedy |
| Format | : | Hardcover 336 pages |
| Genre | : | Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Literary Fiction |

# From Reader Review Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes for online ebook

### Jeffrey says

I moved to Albany the year after the events in this book took place and had no idea that anything of the sort was going on, but that doesn't mean it wasn't. William Kennedy always makes me feel like I live in a different world, at a different level, and I probably do. I was a student at the time, anyway, so I was sort of busy. So much for history!

This was very well written, though I think I missed a lot. The switch from Cuba to Albany was abrupt but I was able to catch up soon enough. I do love his sense of dialogue - it rings true for me. His description of the elder George Quinn wandering around Albany in his hazy dementia with totally preserved social skills, bumping into old friends and political cronies, including the mayor and an old girlfriend, shows just how far you can get on social skill alone. Brilliant! Except for the girlfriend, none of them seem to realize that he was skating on extremely thin ice.

Thanks to William Kennedy for showing us that if we think we live in a boring place we should look again and think again. There are many things happening at many levels right where you are. Just pick up your head and look around and appreciate the diversity and the complexity of it all. If you are a writer, quit wishing you were born at a different time or place so that you'd have something interesting to write about. Right now, right where you are is the best place to start.

Of course he did manage to include Ernest Hemingway and Fidel Castro in the book about Albany. And he did manage to choose a time of great social change. Still, he spins this story for us to show the inside of one place at one time when we would have thought there was very little happening. A neat trick that was!

---

### Jim Leffert says

“Castro’s revolution against Batista’s brutal dictatorship in 1957, and corrupt machine politics and racial unrest in Albany, NY, following Robert Kennedy’s assassination, in 1968: Compare, contrast, and draw connections.” In Chango’s Beads and Two-Toned Shoes, Kennedy answers this essay question primarily by drawing connections. It’s all part of a perpetual revolution, according to the protagonist, Daniel Quinn.

Quinn is a young journalist from Albany who travels to Cuba, just as his grandfather did decades before, determined to visit and interview a revolutionary leader (Cespedes then, Castro now) hiding in the mountains. Once there, Daniel encounters the beautiful Renata, daughter of an elite family but secretly a revolutionary activist and follower of the Afro-Cuban cult of Santeria. Quinn resolves to marry this woman and together, they set out for the countryside where the Batista forces are trying without success to stamp out Castro’s insurgency.

The novel toggles between 19th and 20th century Cuba and between Cuba in 1957 and Albany in 1968. In Cuba, Quinn gets to befriend Hemingway and assists him in a duel. In Albany, we accompany Quinn, who reports for a local newspaper, Renata, and others during the night of unrest that follows RFK’s assassination. On that fateful, violent night, Quinn walks the streets with several generations, including his Alzheimers-

ridden dad, who is one of the book's more memorable characters, his friend, who is a leftist priest, local black activists, and various down-and-outers. Albany's cultural counterpart to Cuba's Hemingway and Santeria is Cody Mason, a local stride piano legend, who, in a flashback to 1937, jams with a visiting Bing Crosby and in 1968 gives what is likely his last concert, to raise funds for his own cancer treatment.

At the core of this rich historical brew is the triangle of Quinn, Renata, and Max Osborne. In addition to being Quinn's editor in Havana, Osborne is a reputed CIA operative, a drug smuggler, and, to Quinn's annoyance, Renata's one-time lover. Alas, there's something not entirely real-life about Quinn's innamorata, Renata. Ultimately, this beautiful, aristocratic, Cuban woman is as elusive to Daniel as she is to us readers.

Recommended especially to people who like 20th century history and/or are interested in Cuba, Chango's Beads and Two-Toned Shoes is a somewhat scattershot but colorful novel, one that impressionistically, but not neatly, brings the two locales together. Joining Albany and Cuba together as twin locales of a "perpetual revolution", Kennedy's novel offers a sympathetic view of the Cuban Revolution, an epochal event that provokes strong and disparate reactions in people. Chango's Beads and Two-Toned Shoes comes across as overly romantic about the Cuban Revolution, reminiscent, in its own way, of how Carlos Eire's memoir, Waiting for Snow in Havana: Confessions of a Cuban Boy, excessively laments it.

---

### John Christian says

Kennedy is one of the great American authors of the last 50 years, and I've read everything he's written. I think part of why I stayed in Albany as long as I did was because I wanted to know and understand the milieu even better, though of course this is far from necessary.

That said, this is probably my second least favorite novel of his (after The Ink Truck). The novel is about revolution and rife with jazz, our American revolutionary music, and it reads like jazz -- it's no mean feat to find the melody line. There are myriad riffs that are brilliant but when adding them up, they kind of left me feeling, for all their artistry, like I didn't form the kinds of deep connections I did with Francis or Billy Phelan, Helen, Martin Daughtery, 19th century Daniel Quinn (the elder), Roscoe, Jack Diamond, Orson, or any number of the protagonists or key foils of Kennedy's other novels. I suspect the source of this disconnection is his close connection with the material: he's obviously the source for the novel's Daniel Quinn, his wife Dana is a source for Quinn's wife Renata (though there are doubtless others), and the events are ones Kennedy lived through (as opposed to researched).

I'm terribly glad I read it, but I don't expect to go re-reading it again in 10 years like I do with his other books.

---

### switterbug (Betsey) says

William Kennedy, winner of the Pulitzer in 1983 for Ironweed, continues on his "Albany cycle" with his latest work, set in both Cuba and Albany. The title, which refers to the protective Santería god; the red and white beads of fire and logic; and the spectator shoes popular in the "Swing-era" days, has a syncopated rhythm all its own, a snazzy, jazzy, bebop, off-riff beat that invites the reader to shake a leg and put some sashay in your stroll.

The jazzy structure of the novel is offbeat, also, and will appeal if you don't expect convention. It has a sense of the improvisational within a complex frame of revolution and racial tension, corrupt Albany politics, and a chunk of Fidel, Batista, and Hemingway. All that, and fiery dialogue that is as sexy as a saxophone.

Ace reporter Daniel Quinn, grandson of the first Daniel Quinn of Civil War reportage in Kennedy's earlier Quinn's Book, is just a boy in 1936, when he looks down from the second floor of his house where his father, George, is entertaining some singers crooning together, including Bing Crosby singing "Shine" with a black piano player. Quinn is seduced by jazz and the company downstairs.

In 1957, in a Havana bar, Quinn meets his soul mate, Renata Suarez Otero, a voluptuously sexy Cuban revolutionary, a supremely brave and lustrous beauty from a long line of beauties and strong women. Daniel and Renata share a separate legacy-- Daniel's father and Renata's mother are prize-winning dancers. Cha-cha-cha.

Renata is so self-assured and graceful that she can step in the shoes of a moll or a blonde-wigged patron of the demi-monde. Daniel can't take his eyes off his Renata, and their bodies glide in rhythm to each other. Their conversations throughout the novel are full of heat and spice, a touch of the axiomatic.

"I am never the same, even when I am not somebody else," she says.

On the same night Quinn meets Renata, he meets Ernest Hemingway, who punches a tourist from Baltimore for his bad singing. Quinn's agency to Papa is established; later, Renata helps Quinn get an interview with Fidel.

The second half of the book takes place in Albany, on the tragic night in 1968 when RFK is assassinated, and the subsequent days waiting for daily updates. At this time, George Quinn is sliding into senility. As he walks the streets of Albany in a moderate confusion, the reader is taken on a trip down the city's memory lane, all in the clamor of a civil rights riot from racial tensions breaking out on the streets. In the midst of this, a black jazz pianist is making his last stand at a club, and all the major characters are part of history-making days and nights.

Feel the ground beat and the half steps, the boogie-woogie and the Hard Bop, the cross-rhythms and codas and the chromatic chords. Kennedy, who, like his protagonist, started out as a reporter, is now 83 years-old, and still has the chops.

---

## Robert says

Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes continues William Kennedy's exploration of Albany, New York's political and street life with a substantial excursion in the first portion of the book into the world of Castro's revolution in Cuba and then, some years later, a reintegration of that setting into the 1969 killing of Robert Kennedy and the concommitant urban unrest that already was boiling in Albany after the assassination of Martin Luther King.

This is a loose novel full of short, declarative sentences, smart talk, wise guys, quasi-magical witches and beautiful women and cameo appearances by the likes of Fidel Castro and Ernest Hemingway.

Castro is thinly drawn, although Daniel Quinn's efforts to interview him while he is still fighting in the bush,

serves as a focal point for part I. Implicitly there is a comparison between between his fight for justice and that of King and Kennedy, but the comparison really is only implicit. Hemingway makes a more extended appearance, and he seems accurately and incisively presented, although why he does what he does, and what he's doing in the novel, doesn't make much sense. He was a bully and a snot, and his references to himself as Dr. Hemigstein smell a bit of anti-Semitism, or at the least, a distaste for psychoanlysis and anything that isn't true and fine and beautiful.

To make a longer story shorter, Quinn meets an unbelievably sensual, sexual, impulsive Cuban named Renata--from a good family, no less--and marries her within a few days of their first encounter. She then is separated from him, abused by the police, and eventually, some lovers later, returns to Quinn's embrace and, ultimately, his life as a reporter in Albany.

On the day in question--which is the heart of the novel--there's unrest in Albany, Quinn's Alzheimer-plagued father has a good time, a concert is played by a dying pianist, Renata's niece is burned along with her rabble-rousing African-American lover, and a large sum of drug money appears...which no one seems to want. (Hey, I'll take it.)

So this isn't the poetically compressed and moving Kennedy of Ironweed. Let's get that out of the way. What is it? Well, it's fun because it's so expertly written and staged, and it's a little confusing because too much happens to too many characters the reader (or this reader) doesn't really understand or identify with.

I remember once having a discussion with a German Faulkner expert who thought that The Reivers was perhaps one of Faulkner's greatest works. Well, that's not the case, and this book is sort of an end-of-career, let's have fun novel by Kennedy.

If you already like Kennedy, you'll want to read it. That's why I read it. If you find yourself impatiently wondering why you're continuing to read it, you probably will be getting some gratification from Kennedy's quick dialogue and his romantic moments of revelation (they come about every three pages and don't always involve sex, many of them are built on a foundation of nostalgia and remembered snatches of song from the thirties and forties.)

In his extensive acknowledgements, Kennedy thanks dozens of Cubans and Americans and cites quite a few rather heavy and obscure books about Cuba and its history. This suggests he took the work quite seriously, but he wrote it comically and overstuffed it with subplots that prevented him from really examining what he had in mind.

---

### Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I struggled doggedly through the first 95 pages because the plot really interested me, but it was just too chaotic and hard to follow. Finally my brain shut down and refused to read another page. I felt a little better about giving it up after reading some reviews from serious William Kennedy fans who said he was not at his best in this one.

One of the things I found very frustrating was the way he introduces so many minor characters with very little to distinguish them, and then keeps referring to them without reminding us of who they are. Are the from the past? present? Are they cousins? friends? lovers? revolutionaries? gunrunners? aunts? uncles? cartoon characters? I couldn't keep 'em straight, hard as I tried.

### Keith says

The first third of this book is a delightful tribute to Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway appears several times as a supporting character, and these scenes are funny and true to Hemingway's personality. The narrative of a journalist from Albany NY in Cuba during the revolution fits well with Hemingway's literary terrain. I enjoyed the dramatic love story as well.

The middle third of the book is a hodgepodge of scenes back in Albany NY. A variety of characters are depicted and the only unifying element is either family connections or longstanding associations and friendships. While some of the scenes are engaging, I was not prepared for all this jumping around.

Clearly Kennedy had a batch of short stories but his publisher wouldn't let him put it out as a story collection. It's called a novel, but does not hold together the way a novel ought to. Feeling adrift in a random series of events, I gave up on this book before finishing it.

---

### Marvin says

This novel of revolutions is precisely the kind of book that I often like very much: an intimately personal story with striking characters set in the midst of larger political/cultural change. It even has quite a bit about music. And large chunks of the novel are, indeed, very striking; I particularly liked the way the author treated the main character's father with dementia. But just as I would get thoroughly wrapped up in one story, the author would fly off in another direction, and I'd be sort of lost for a while--or at least frustrated that the previous story was left hanging. And the author seems to know it; on at least two occasions the main character comments on the novel he's thinking of writing and frets that there's too much to capture and too many characters--many of them "winos and bums." For the first third of the novel, set in Cuba in 1957, I had hopes that here, finally, was a novel of the Cuban revolution to compare with the many fine novels about the Chinese revolution, but then he drops that story at a crucial point--letting us know 150 pages later, and then only obliquely and quickly, what happened after he dropped the story--to return to Albany in 1969 at the height of racial tensions there (and elsewhere in the U.S.). Again, much of that story is effective, even brilliant, but it's hard to keep up. Maybe I'd have had less difficulty if I'd read any of the earlier books in the "Albany Cycle," but, then again, if other reviews are any indication, probably not.

---

### Jay says

This book had a lot of promise, and if had one or two more rewrites it would have been a very good read.

---

### Fred Mendez says

I admit that I don't do much research on works of fiction. My choices are typically determined by what has won awards or what I heard about on NPRs Fresh Air. I think I picked this one up because it was noted as one of the best of the year by the NYT. I really enjoyed the first half of the book, when it was based in

revolutionary Cuba. Great descriptive narrative, and a wonderful incorporation of political history into a dramatic storyline. The fast forward a few years later, but in the US, fell flat for me. I never was able to reconnect to the high drama of the first half, and I finished the book more out of obligation than enjoyment.

---

### Brad Hodges says

'"Remove the colon and semicolon keys from your typewriter,'" said Hemingway. 'Shun adverbs, strenuously.'" This advice is given to Daniel Quinn, a newspaperman looking for stories in Havana during the late '57. A lover of short, declarative sentences, Quinn strides up to the great writer in the Floradita and introduces himself. This will draw him into grand romantic adventure.

William Kennedy also seems to prescribe to Hemingway's advice, for Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes, which unites Quinn's Cuban adventure with a day of racial violence in Albany New York in 1968, writes with precision and snap. The book is about the days when newspapers were king, and reporters were heroic. Quinn's grandfather covered the Civil War, originally rode with the Fenians as they invaded Canada, and then covered a revolution in Cuba. Quinn has gone to discover his grandfather's legacy, and ends up with an interview with Fidel Castro and a wife.

Kennedy has written a number of books about Albany, including Ironweed, which I count as one of the ten best books I've ever read. Chango isn't quite on that level--it at times is a little scattered in thought, as the two stories don't fit together like jigsaw puzzle pieces--but it has much to admire. The first scene is a prologue when Quinn is a boy, and his father has a black jazz pianist over. Also visiting is Bing Crosby, and they sing the song "Shine," which is a standard but is also racist, a so-called "coon" song. Later, in the Albany section of the book, the son of that pianist hates the song, but his father continues to play it, though makes it his own.

The Albany section of the book takes place on the same day that Robert Kennedy is shot. Quinn's father, now suffering from dementia, has a grand adventure, as he wanders away from the Elks Club where Quinn has installed him and ends up at the center of a race riot. Quinn and a crusading liberal priest, Matt Daugherty, who is the kind of priest I wish there were more of, is a great character, as is Tremont, the son of a legendary black numbers runner and "coon song" singer, who is set up as a patsy in an assassination plot against the mayor. Quinn and Daugherty are all over town trying to put out fires, both literally and figuratively.

In Cuba, Quinn gets involved with a duel between Hemingway and a doltish salesman who Hemingway punches in the mouth. Quinn ends up as the referee in the duel, which Hemingway handles with elan. Quinn also meets Renata, who is a lover of one of the men who leads an assault against Batista that fails completely. Quinn is immediately in love with Renata, who follows the Santeria religion and wears the beads of Chango, a Santeria deity. These beads will later save her life.

This is a meaty, man's kind of book, with punchy quotes like, "The last time I refused a drink I didn't understand the question," and "Not since grammar school when I saw myself playing the banjo in heaven. When I got older I gave up on heaven, also the banjo. I don't trust religion anymore."

The book is also about memory. Wherever Quinn's father goes during his odyssey he remembers the Albany of old. A one-time waltz champion (Quinn tells Renata that they are destined to be together because his father and her mother were waltz champions), he takes to the dance floor and all the old moves come back to

him. George is full of nuggets from the past: "'Fella named Zangara shot Mayor Cernak of Chicago,' George said. 'He was aiming at FDR but he missed. He was an Italian with stomach trouble and he lost two hundred at the dog races. They gave him eighty years but when Mayor Cermak died they sizzled him in Old Sparky.'"

The book ends poignantly, with George Quinn dancing with his daughter-in-law, Renata: "He was smiling, not at her but reveling in his own artistry as he moved her with astonishing control. He is dancing me back in time, she decided, he's dead to this day but alive in history: you are dancing with a ghost, Renata." Despite the use of the colon, I think Hemingway would have liked it.

---

### Larry Scarzfava says

Another great novel by William Kennedy! Beautiful prose, believable characters, and a plot that moves so effortlessly, making it difficult to put the novel down!

---

### Tony says

CHANGO'S BEADS AND TWO-TONE SHOES. (2011). William Kennedy. ***.
Kennedy is one of my favorite writers, and his "Albany" series is one of the best to be found in American literature. This novel, however, is not up to what I think is his best level. The word I want to use is "disjointed." He has a story to tell that ultimately leads back to Albany, but you wonder why half of the book is devoted to the doings of Daniel Quinn (whom we have met in prevous novels) in Cuba. OK – so it's background, but do we need so much of it? Then you have lots of local color thrown in with no real reason – Bing Crosby, Fidel Castro, Ernest Hemingway – although these make for nice vignettes, they don't move the story forward. Unfortunately, I found myself doing a lot of skimming – something I dont normally do with a novel by Mr. Kennedy. If this is on your list as a first read by this author, move it to the bottom of the list and put some of his other works ahead of it, like, "Ironweed," "Legs," or "Billy Phelan's Greatest Game." If you read one or more of those first, it gives you a better idea of his talent than this latest novel.

---

### Ken says

This is a kind of novel that might not appeal to all readers. Although entertaining, I felt it was more a series of very well written scenes that happened to be loosely connected. The novel is divided into three broad sections. The first we meet Daniel Quinn, one of the central characters, as a young child in 1936. In the next section the the action switches to Cuba, and we meet Ernest Hemingway and learn of Fidel Castro's relationship with his people and country. And, the third and longest section, returns to the streets of Albany, New York during the race riots which occurred after the assassination of Robert Kennedy.

The writing is like a 'free-style' Jazz improvisation, and characters deliver a blizzard of historical detail and rich insight, yet a strong story-line never really emerges to define the novel. Certain parts of the book are nearly spellbinding, but it's not the kind of novel that easily ties together. On the other hand, it's an audacious concept to make any kind of connection between Castro's Cuban revolution and the racial strife in Albany, New York during the summer of 1968.

### Jean says

Although I loved Wm. Kenney's past novels which seem to be now among the classics, this story seems too contrived and written around and for the historical facts and events and doesn't have the flow of character dialogue and storyline that I would have expected from him.
I did however like the way the author very smoothly and with the deft of a seasoned writer switch from the first person to third person narrative without the reader hardly noticing. That was impressive.