

Our House in the Last World

Oscar Hijuelos

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Bearing all the hallmarks of Hijuelos's later work—exuberance, passion, honesty, and humor—this debut novel was heralded on its publication twenty years ago as "virtuoso writing...a novel of great warmth and tenderness" (*New York Times Book Review*). Filled with the sights and sounds of Cuba's Oriente province and New York City, the music and films of the fifties, lusty fantasies and the toughest of life's realities, it is the unforgettable story of Hector Santinio, the American-born son of Cuban immigrants, who is haunted by tales of "home" (a Cuba he has never seen) and by the excesses and then the death of his loving father. This edition includes a new autobiographical introduction by the author, reflecting on how he came to write *Our House in the Last World*, and a new afterword in which he comments on the story.

Our House in the Last World Details


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Author : Oscar Hijuelos

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From Reader Review Our House in the Last World for online ebook

Book Concierge says

3.5***

Hijuelos' debut novel spans five decades, telling the story of the Santinio family from 1929 in Cuba to 1975 in New York. Alejo and Mercedes emigrate to New York City from Cuba in 1943, where he finds work as a cook in a fancy hotel and she tries to make a life in an apartment so far from her childhood estate. They have two sons, Horacio and Hector, who struggle with their own identities; are they Americans or Cubans? It is a love story, a family saga, a coming-of-age story, and a novel of the immigrant experience.

Alejo is a man who has never met a stranger. He is exuberant and generous, always the life of the party, a loyal friend and a ladies' man. But he is consumed by want. His life is not what he envisioned and he cannot understand how things went so wrong. He drinks to drown his sorrows and descends into melancholy. He doesn't recognize how his actions push his children away, when all he wants is to be recognized as THE MAN and a FATHER to be respected.

Mercedes is a woman who lives in the past. She cannot let go of past glories of life with her father when she was a young girl. She loves Alejo, but the man he has become is a stranger to her. She is alone because of her lack of English and her reliance on saints and signs and dreams and mysticism. Fiercely protective of her children she doesn't recognize that her smothering is harming them rather than helping them.

Horacio grows as a nearly feral child. Clearly his parents' violent arguments affect him and he turns to his friends and to the streets, finally escaping into the U.S. Air Force.

And baby Hector is trapped in his own skin and desperately seeking an escape. He is neither Cuban nor American. Neither a man nor a son. His father dotes on him, but he cannot return the affection of this man who is so unreliable and prone to drunken violence.

Hijuelos's writing is vivid and passionate, with scenes that are ethereal and full of mysticism contrasted with scenes of brutal reality. People yell in anger, whoop in celebration, cry in despair and wallow in silence.

Linda says

The Santinio family is a hot mess. The fascinating characters and family dynamics makes this an amazing novel.

Alejo and Mercedes Santinio move from Cuba to New York. They had comfortable lives and loving families in Cuba, but left hoping to make a fortune that never materializes. Alejo is a force of nature. People are drawn to him. Women like him and he has many friends. He gives money away to look like a big shot even though he can't afford it. People he helps become successful and rich, while Alejo remains poor. Alejo works hard as a cook and entertains the idea of owning a bodega. He eats and drinks too much. He also abuses his wife and disappears for days.

SPOILER ALERT: Stop here if you don't want to read the spoiler. I summarize books for personal reference because I keep forgetting what I read.

Mercedes doesn't leave and raises their two sons, Horatio and Hector. Mercedes has it rough. Alejo isn't a good husband and Mercedes has a sister-in-law from hell, Buita. Hector gets sick and remains hospitalized for months. He stops speaking Spanish and Mercedes becomes overbearing. She doesn't let him play with other kids or go to school because of the microbios. Horatio lives a normal life, but can't wait to leave his family. He joins the military and distances himself. Alejo dies from a heart attack at work and Mercedes loses it. Hector treats her horribly and doesn't have the patience to help her. The family's struggles and drama show the harsh reality of the American dream.

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Penney Knightly says

The writing is pretty solid, and downright poetic in spots — particularly the reminiscences of his mother, and the family's original heritage. However, I did feel as a reader that I was skipping around through time and space; it felt a bit 'loose'.

I would have liked maybe some more dialog snippets, or more pieces of color. I felt as if I was being talked at, and even though a certain amount of that is to be expected for this type of work, I feel the author had the skill and capacity to make the history even more engaging.

But, to fairly note, I had some difficulty arousing interest for the subject matter, as I am female, white, and the furthest-possible demographic to connect with the experience. Yet, I admit it was very well written. It was worth reading for the perspective and insight.

Sonny says

Exceptional read! Ranks right there with "Mambo Kings" for my taste. Hijuelos is truly an "Urban Poet" who paints a colorful canvas in detailing the immigrant experience. I thought the author vividly brought to life one family's struggle with getting acclimated to the new world while retaining their Cuban roots....superb!!

Tom Schulte says

Covering basically the 1930s thru the '70s, this multi-generational Cuban-American family epic goes from the aristocratic Sorrea family in eastern Cuba to Mercedes, the second of three daughters, who sees the ghost of her father frequently and dreams. She marries Alejo Santinio who wants a more exciting life away from rural Cuba and decides to emigrate with Mercedes to the United States. They have the boys Hector and older brother Horacio. This becomes Hector's tale who seems to have inherited his mother's phantasmagoric

sensitivities. The changes in Cuba up to Castro and the United States over those decades is the backdrop. What I liked most about this novel is the flavor of the dream-like recollections, relying on wistful passages and little dialogue. This is a delicate balance for the author, as the story threatens to drift away, unmoored by the delicate prose and description. However, it proves a firm enough foundation to support a reincarnation recollection back to Columbus.

Fred Daly says

This autobiographical novel covers a lot of ground -- too much, I think, as it leaps from episode to episode over several decades in one family's experience moving from Cuba to NYC. It's like a greatest hits album. I liked parts of it quite a lot, and when I went to a reading Hijuelos did (from his memoir, which is how I know the novel is based on his own life), I liked him quite a lot, so I look forward to trying another of his books soon.

Lorna says

Our House in the Last World is the fictional novel taking place in Cuba before the revolution through the time of the overthrow of Batista and the subsequent takeover by Fidel Castro and the effects on the people. It addresses the immigrant experience as the novel spans the lives of one family that emigrated from Cuba to Miami and New York with all of the attendant struggles. One of my favorite authors, this was the first book by Hijuelos, filled with the haunting and beautiful lyrics he is known for.

"The white blossoms that left Mercedes's hand and fell into the open grave might have drifted endlessly downward -- into the clouds and sky of Cuba, long ago, falling down, carried in a breeze that swayed the treetops and scattered them the road in Holguin."

Deni Loubert says

I stumbled upon this book through BookBubs and was really drawn into the author's world of early Cuba and the story of his parents life. He takes us with such gentle touches and light humor through the way of life in Cuba before Castro for his mother and father. They lived very different lives and when they finally came together and moved to New York we saw the changes in the world around them. All the characters are so real and believable, because of course this is Oscar Hijuelos writing this, a true world-class author. But the fact this is his first novel shows in the little things that reveal his own thoughts and views. I can't recommend this book enough for anyone who loves wonderful down to earth characters, a glimpse into 1940s and 50s Cuba and the early immigrant days of the Cuban refugees. I couldn't put it down and read it in one afternoon/evening.

PMP says

My favourite part is the tenderness with which OH reminisces about what it was like to write his first book. Other than with a nostalgic and indulging eye, it is not quite possible to read this after you've been knocked

out by his more mature work.

Marge says

My first book by Hijuelos, the Cuban-American author, and I found it to be a beautiful meditation on family, on being second generation, on ghosts of home and of beloved parents. The novel contains complex portraits of the central characters' parents, who suffered and who caused each other and their children to suffer, but who also loved. I look forward to reading more of Hijuelos's work.

Morgan says

Wow, typos galore.

I was not particularly enchanted by this story. The abuse between the husband and wife, and then the children was all very clearly written, but the story itself was just okay. The ending especially was lagging for me. The last two sections (or chapters) just dragged on and on. I would have rather had a short and sweet epilogue rather than the gibberish. I'm sure there was some deeper meaning to all that, but I had lost my patience in reading the end of the book far before that. If I hadn't been reading this for a class I would have just put it down.

Probably wouldn't recommend this book to anyone.

Bandit says

I have a great interest in both immigrant stories and New York stories, this book seems to check both of those boxes plus there was that reassurance of quality based on the author being a Pulitzer winner. Did it live up to expectations? Well, yes and no. The quality was there, most impressive for a debut novel, strong writing throughout, phenomenally nuanced characterization, the works, but the plot was just...exhausting. And this primarily had to do with the fact that the family the book follows throughout the years from Cuba to New York was such an unhappy bunch. Unlike their friends and family they failed to succeed in their adopted home, partially due to never letting go of their provincial (old country, cringe inducingly backward) mindsets, and their frustrations and limitations slowly rip them apart and traumatize their children. Hijuelos did a great job of making this characters sympathetic in all their numerous all too human flaws, especially since some of the story is autobiographic, but it wasn't an easy read by any means. Interesting and well done, but maybe not particularly enjoyable in the traditional meaning of the word. Fascinating look at Cuban and Cuban American cultures, but an emotionally laborious read.

Jan Davis says

The most depressing book I've ever read. Promising start but then it was just page after page of drunk, abusive and crazy people. Weird descriptions repeated over and over...how happy are mice? Apparently the happiest creatures on earth. Not a redeeming thing about any character. Easy to see it was a college student

writing what he thought would be a great novel. He was incorrect.

Russell Sanders says

What a treat to revisit Oscar Hijuelos by reading his first novel *Our House in the Last World*. Hijuelos writes with a rhythm that is unmistakable. It's as if, as you read, there is a Cuban guitarist softly strumming in the background. Although he writes sometimes of brutality and heartache, Hijuelos provides a beautiful glimpse into what it means to be Cuban-American, to be thrust from one's country, longing to retain your birthright yet wanting to make it in your new country. In Hijuelos's novels, some make it, some don't. And the journey is the delight, even as we see characters so terribly flawed by their longings. *Our House in the Last World* tells of Alejo Santinio and his wife Mercedes as they raise their two sons in mid-20th century New York City, having immigrated from Cuba a few years before Castro took over the country. While other immigrant relatives and friends are adjusting to the new country, planting new roots, and gaining success, Alejo is a fish out of water. He struggles the entire time of his residency in NYC, taking out his frustrations on his wife and sons. Mercedes, meanwhile, is extremely unhappy and cannot cope with the poverty she's been thrust into by her husband. She endures his spending their money on others, hoping to impress them, and she endures his brutality toward her, all the while suffering the hatefulness of Alejo's sister Buita who despises Mercedes and would do anything to rip Mercedes's two sons from her to raise as her, Buita's, own. *Our House in the Last World* is a powerful examination of how we deal with our fates, and ultimately, despite the fact it portrays a man whose life seems wasted and thrown away, we see that Alejo's sons and his wife grew from having known him.

Lovett.nicholas says

A very flawed first novel, but one that shows the hallmarks of his later work: florid prose, sympathetic rendering of imperfect characters, knockout set pieces and great narrative flow. I'm very impressed that he made the jump from this to the *Mambo Kings* in five years. Tremendous growth. I gave this four stars instead of the two and a half it deserves because I'm such a devoted fan of his work.
