At the Socialism or Death Bakery

TRADING WITH THE ENEMY
A Yankee Travels Through Castro's Cuba
By Tom Miller
Atheneum. 353 pp. $24

By Constance Casey

TOM MILLER's account of eight months living in Cuba is more of a travel book than a Cuban book, and a good thing, too. He brings a couple of qualities to the subject that have been in short supply in Cuba books of the past 32 years—compassion and humor. Miller isn't a reporter or a representative of U.S. interests; he's a chatterer and a listener, and a Havana resident, albeit temporary. Using the loophole that allows Americans to go to Cuba for research purposes, Miller sublets an apartment. He also squeezes onto a city bus, buys his bread at the Socialism or Death Bakery, and rides the milk train south to Cienfuegos. He spent a couple of weeks in 1987 and again in 1989 figuring out how to establish residence. He then moved to Cuba in the middle of 1990, and in 1991, when he was home in Arizona writing, the Soviet bloc went through its death throes and left its Caribbean protege up the creek. Miller went back for a few weeks in 1992, for a total of —*Continued on page 14*

Constance Casey, a senior editor at Pacific News Service, traveled in Cuba this past summer.

eight months, to see how his friends were weathering the crisis.

The stock answer Miller gave Cubans who asked him how he liked the place was, "It's a marvelous and deeply troubled country," a description that also applies to our country—the other side of this family feud. Miller can drive through cane fields and go to baseball games and night clubs and cigar factories and find the place marvelous, without feeling compelled to speculate on what's going to happen next, or who's right here, us or them. Officially we don't acknowledge how marvelous the place is, and officially, the more troubled Cuba becomes, the better for us. Which, when you think of it, is a bizarre attitude to take about a place with 10.6 million people in it that's a 45-minute plane ride from Miami. Miller's leisurely evocation of Cuban character leads the reader to conclude that "he's got to die sometime" does not constitute a reasonable foreign policy.

MILLER's account covers roughly the same time period on the island as Miami Herald reporter Andre Oppenheimer's feverishly titled *Castro's Final Hour: The Secret Story Behind the Coming Downfall of Communist Cuba.* Both Miller and Oppenheimer experienced the "special period in time of peace" declared by Castro to save gas, ration food and funnel resources into the few industries that could generate hard currency. Oppenheimer found the Cuban people reduced to "zombiehood" by the struggle to survive. Miller doesn't press every Cuban he talks to to find out what will happen next. He is interested in the Cuban things that were there before Castro and that will be there after him—especially cigars, music and baseball.

Miller is whatever the opposite of a hard-liner is; if he errs, it's on the side of lightheartedness. Readers familiar with his previous travel book, "The Panama Hat Trail," (which answered the question, "Where do Panama hats come from?" Ecuador, not Panama) will find in "Trading" the same desultory charm and sympathy for the underdog. (An explanation for the latter: Miller grew up in Washington as a Senators fan.) Miller is not the muscular or pushy sort of travel writer. If Paul Theroux had undertaken travels in Cuba, he would have circumnavigated the island by kayak, or maybe underwater, in scuba gear. Jan Morris would have pulled strings to get a six-hour interview with Fidel.

Miller is quite tart about the Official Writers to whom the Cuban government steers every visiting journalist, and just as skeptical about the Official Dissidents on the U.S. rolodex. The pains he takes to round up more than the usual suspects pay off with some surprising encounters. The best is a long afternoon—what turns out to be in effect four hours of psychotherapy—with Nitza Villapol, the author of the Cuban equivalent of *The Joy of Cooking.* Villapol is also the Julia Child of Cuba; her cooking show, on since 1951, is the longest running television show in the world. She's in a terrible mood, she doesn't want to talk, her sink is full of dirty dishes and she just had canned clam chowder for lunch.

Miller's low-key chattiness wins her over; Villapol goes from scowling to sobbing. He ends up comforting her, and taking out her garbage. Her story brings up a repeated theme in Cuban encounters—

closeness and affection for the United States. Villapol's father worked for Macy's and she was born in New York. When the family returned to Havana in 1933, they sailed on the Orizaba, the same boat from which the writer Hart Crane had jumped to his death the year before. That's the kind of quirky detail Miller cares about. Though proud of her country, she feels isolated and deserted. When Miller revisits Villapol a few months later, when things have gotten tougher, she is introducing her viewers to grapefruit steak—fried grapefruit rind with garlic and lemon.

Miller returns to Cuba to check on friends, and these are friends rather than interview subjects. They include the rural librarian who copied by hand a Gabriel Garcia Marquez article about Graham Greene, the Havana Symphony oboist from whom Miller takes lessons, the man who reads Agatha Christie and the daily news to workers making cigars, and the trainer for the Forestales, the baseball team Miller traveled with.

Miller's structure is loose. That there really is a method under all this affable chattiness becomes evident when he departs from it for a short riff on Cuban eroticism (specifically culophilia, a fascination with the female rear end) that doesn't work. One could wish for a little more rigor. A "Roger and Me" scenario is introduced when Miller puts in a request to interview Fidel. But Miller gives up very fast; one thousand interview applications from foreign writers were pending. His application is charming, but doomed to fail:

"I wrote that I wanted to chat with him about the places and personalities I had encountered during my stay, about baseball, about Cubans in exile, Caribbean music, Afro-Cuban culture, the Guantanamo navy base, literature from and about Cuba, and the aspirations of Cuban youth . . . I also was burning to know why Cuba, of all countries, had adopted the designated hitter, a decision I considered a metaphor for compromise and national disintegration."

Miller's offhand curiosity dictates his routes. He wonders what it's like on both sides of the fence at Guantanamo and finds a swarm of ironies. He wonders what the Bay of Pigs looks like, and finds cedar and mahogany trees, parrots, herons, white egrets, royal palms. "The Bay of Pigs," he writes in one of his few political statements, "is a sizable body of water to the people who live nearby, but to the rest of the world it signifies the failed 1961 invasion of a Cuban exile force backed by the U.S. government. It became the pivotal event in relations between the countries. It sealed official animosity and directly led to bellicose policies that have long outlived their usefulness."

If Miller's book could be said to have a climax, or a grandest adventure, it's the week he travels with the Forestales, and sees them lose many games and not win one. Baseball is one area in which Cuba is a paradise of underdevelopment. No Astroturf, free admission, underpaid players. The only snake in the garden is the designated hitter. Miller's 1950s memories of Cuban players for the Senators are much appreciated. (For longtime Washington residents: how long has it been since you heard the names Camilo Pascual, Julio Beckquer, Jose Valdivielso, Pedro Ramos?)

When Miller proposed his Cuban travel book to publishers he told them he wasn't interested in Marxist health care or sugar harvest quotas, but in showing how people live their lives. He has succeeded, blithely flying in the face of official animosity on both sides. ■