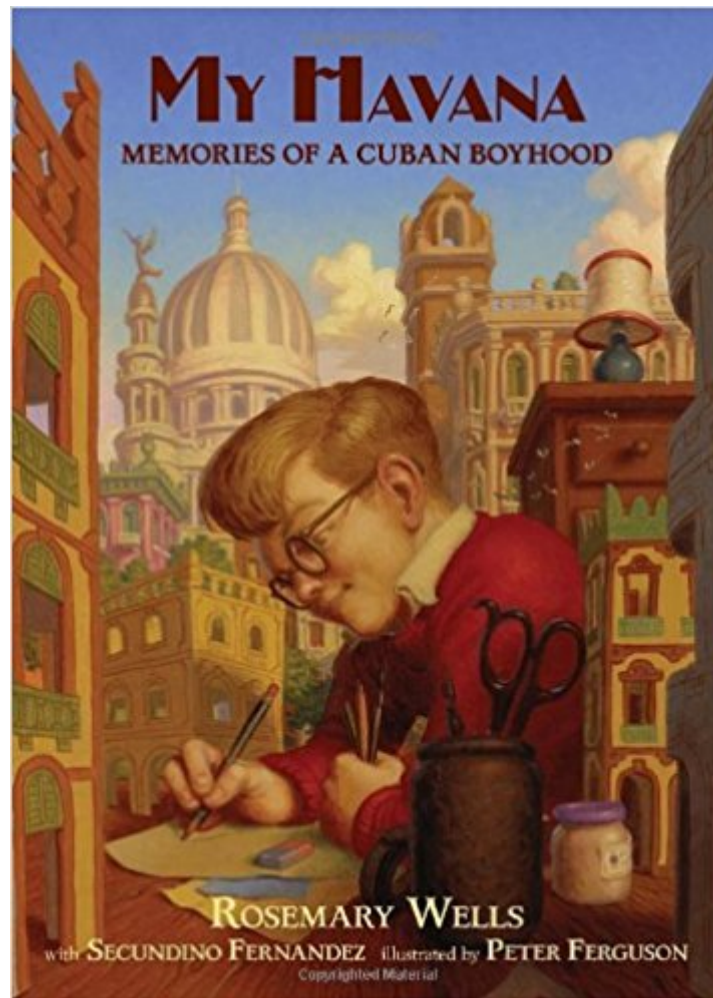




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# My Havana: Memories Of A Cuban Boyhood



## Synopsis

A young Cuban immigrant eases his homesickness by re-creating the city of Havana in a poignant tale that will resonate with readers today. "You're always drawing in that notebook of yours," Dino's friend teases. To the small boy, 1950s Havana is alive with color, music, and glamour, and he itches to capture it on paper. When Fidel Castro and the Communist Party take over the Cuban government, Dino's family must move to New York, where the lonely boy pours his heart into making a model of Havana's archways and balconies, buildings and streets. Rosemary Wells composes a tender ode to an immigrant boy who grew up to be a U.S. architect, while Peter Ferguson's atmospheric paintings evoke two vibrant cities as they were half a century ago.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 7 - 10 years

Grade Level: 2 - 5

## Customer Reviews

Gr 4-6â "In an author's note, Wells explains that she first heard a radio interview with the architect Secundino Fernandez in 2001 in which he spoke of leaving his homeland at the beginning of Castro's regime. Wells related to his story and tracked him down; the result is this engaging fictionalized tale. It follows Dino's idyllic childhood in Cuba to his years of living in Spain with his maternal grandparents, back to Cuba, and then describes his life as a Spanish-speaking immigrant in New York City in 1959. He laments the cold, drab winter and his difficulties with the language. He

gets lost on the way home from school; his Puerto Rican classmates speak a different dialect; and his teacher is mean to him until his drawing skills win favor. By the end of the school year, Dino has made a friend, been promoted, and discovered Coney Island. "New York sunlight, shimmering with the promise of summer, settles round my shoulders like the arms of my mother. It is almost like my Havana." The story is a window into the early life of an artist; Fernandez sees his world differently, noticing colors, shapes, and texturesâ "even temperaturesâ "of the buildings around him. Readers are introduced to several infamous dictators and political figures including Castro, Che Guevara, Franco, Hitler, and Batista. Striking, full-color, full-page illustrations, along with black-and-white thumbnails and a few childhood photographs, capture the magical memories that inspired this tribute. Barbara Auerbach, PS 217, Brooklyn, NY

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In this fictionalized, first-person account, Wells teams up with architect Fernandez in a portrait of a child's life under Castro's Cuba, Franco's Spain, and Eisenhower's America. Small and observant, "Dino" loves to draw his colorful Havana surroundings. At age six, he visits his grandparents in Madrid, and his shock over his new surroundings changes his drawing style as he develops his unique visual perspective. A highly anticipated homecoming in Cuba is short-lived, though; after threats from Che Guevara, Dino's family flees to "terribly black and gray" New York City. Eventually, Dino is able to draw on old memories as well as the thrill of new friends, a new language, and fresh visual inspiration to help him assimilate and grow up to become a respected and accomplished architect. Full-color and black-and-white illustrations throughout add to the strong atmospheric language to make for a literary piece that will be understandable to anyone who's ever left one place and made a new life in another. Grades 3-5. --Andrew Medlar

My daughter loved this book!

My Cuban born husband said, "yup, that's the way it was" when it came time to leave his beloved country as a 9 year old child.

Great cultural read

Wells, a bestselling children's author was moved to tell Secundino Fernandez's story after hearing a 2001 radio interview with the architect. When Fernandez was a boy he and his parents had to leave

his home in Havana, Cuba. In 1954, Secundino (Dino) is six years old. He loves Havana and is constantly sketching the city buildings. Oct. 1954, is the first time the Fernandez family leaves Havana. The family moved to Spain for 3 years. Dino's father must look after his brother's family, while he recovers from a rooftop fall. Dino still carries a sketchbook but many times the pages stay empty. Dino misses home. At school Dino is teased for his Cuban accent. It's in Spain, where Dino first hears the word dictator and what it means to be ruled by one. Abuela buys eggs and butter in secret from a man who hides them under his cloak and comes to the back door at night. Almost nothing from the outside, goods or medicine, ever makes its way into Francisco Franco's Spain. "Franco makes himself and his friends rich," says Abuela Maria "while the rest of us live on bread and water." She says this very softly as if someone might be hiding and listening. In 1956, the Fernandez family move back to Havana. Dino's parents go back to work at the restaurant they own. In 1959 when Fidel Castro comes into power, it's time for the Fernandez family to say good bye to Havana. The book is filled with many facts and is very readable. I can almost see Fernandez sharing his childhood memories with Wells. I don't know where Ferguson, the illustrator was, but he couldn't have been very far. The gorgeous illustrations perfectly match the text. Also think they make My Havana that much more appealing to young readers. There aren't many books for the 8 and older set that mention 1. Spain's dictator, 2. Castro and the ruler he overthrew, 3. Latino people come in many different hues and 4. a look at Che Guevara, not as a good guy. I feel like I really got to know Dino, the boy who loved to draw the buildings of his home country. My Havana is a wonderful memoir. I highly recommend it.

During the first six years of his life, Dino Fernandez lived in Havana, Cuba - a city built by angels, as his father fondly liked to claim. Dino may have been even more enamored of the city than his parents. He especially admired the architecture and could spend hours drawing buildings, domes, and courtyards in his sketchbooks. It thus came as a rude shock when a family emergency led Dino and his parents to leave Havana for Spain. For a two-year period marked by frugal living under Spain's dictatorial Franco regime, Dino struggled with intense homesickness as he longed for Havana's splendor and friendlier way of life. Upon returning home, however, he learned that Cuba's own political problems would make it impossible for his parents to continue operating their restaurant in Havana. Leaving Cuba permanently proved heart-wrenching for Dino until he found comfort in building his own kind of Havana. Based on the personal recollections of New York City-based architect Secundino Fernandez, My Havana offers readers a unique glimpse of Havana and its inhabitants in pre-Communist times. The narrative blends in several economics concepts,

including the economic role of government in socialist economies and the importance of small business opportunities for supporting household well-being. Exquisite illustrations add a visually appealing element and help readers to better understand Dino's attachment to Havana's culture and architecture.

Writer Rosemary Wells and Cuban-born architect Secundino Fernandez have teamed up to chronicle the events of his childhood. The young "Dino" depicted in these pages is a remarkable little boy. Even from an early age, he is in love with Havana's buildings, taking note of the colors and architectural quirks that make these places special. When he and his family move from Cuba twice during his childhood, first to Spain to care for a sick relative, and lastly to the US to flee Castro's dictatorship, it is not without a sense of mourning. What makes the story so poignant is its emphasis on homesickness and longing, reminding the reader of things they may take for granted. Ferguson's vibrant oil paintings only add to this rich experience. Recommended for Ages 9-12.

I may be significantly biased, as this is a fictionalized story about my father's childhood, but this is a fantastic book. Beautifully illustrated and fantastically written, this book relives a vivid story of the Havana as it existed without the shackles of Communism. It is impossible to read this book without hoping that someday the beautiful buildings of Dino's Havana will once again flourish and thrive.

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