

1. JBC: What compelled you to write about the Cuban Revolution?

AJ: I'm always looking for a good story. When I wrote *Forgiving Maximo Rothman*, I met Miriam Bradman Abrahams through Jewish Book Council. She wrote the review for JBC. Over the years we became friends. I became aware of her personal history. She was born in Cuba and escaped shortly after Castro's revolution with her family. Miriam approached me with her family story and after some preliminary interviews with her parents I decided their story was perfect for me. My knowledge of authoritarian regimes, my interest in diverse Jewish communities, and my personal experiences in the Spanish Caribbean, ability to speak Spanish and comfort within that culture, combined to make this the perfect story for me to tackle.

2. JBC: Many books have been written about the Cuban Revolution, both fiction and non-fiction. How is your work different?

AJ: What sets *Incident at San Miguel* apart from other novels about the Cuban Revolution is that it's centered on the Cuban-Jewish experience specifically, and that its central story is focused on how the revolution split families, yet poses the question of what comes first, your obligation to your personal beliefs, or to your family, despite differences in those beliefs. As Ruth Behar said about it, "we see the Cuban Revolution in an entirely new light..." While the experience of the revolution is not unique to Jewish Cubans, the book also examines how the revolution affected a thriving community and ultimately sent it into exile, as well as how durable the Jewish-Cuban identity is.

As concerns the retelling of history in fiction as opposed to non-fiction, I believe fiction is a better medium for transmitting the emotional aspects of an experience than a history, biography, or even a memoir in many cases. That's not to say reading a memoir, biography, or history isn't worthwhile. What historical fiction gives a reader is a unique perspective. Fiction puts the reader into the head of the character. The reader literally feels what the character feels. It is the closest we can get to time travel. If I've done my job well, you'll cry when the character cries, you'll laugh when she laughs, and you'll be terrified when she's terrified.

3. JBC: What kind of stories do you seek?

AJ: I seek stories that celebrate the human condition, the ability to rise above what might destroy us. I write about ordinary people faced with extraordinary circumstances. Meet the moment, triumph over adversity.

I hear lots of stories. How do I know which one will make a great novel? By how drawn-in I become when hearing it. A lot also depends on how nonchalant the teller of the story is. For instance, in this story, *Incident at San Miguel*, when Juan Bradman told me,

as if it were nothing unusual, that he had met Che Guevara and challenged him I knew I had a story.

4. JBC: Did anything about the story behind *Incident at San Miguel* change your view of the world or history?

AJ: Yes, researching and interviewing for this book did change my basic world view. To be perfectly honest I have always been on the left politically. In many ways I can be considered a socialist. As such, I've always felt that communist and socialist systems have received a biased and unfair rap in capitalist versions of history. On a trip to China in 1986 I noted that children weren't begging in the streets, everyone was literate, housing, education and medical care were available to everyone. This contrasted starkly with my experiences traveling in Peru, Mexico, and Haiti, where poverty was both obvious and excruciating.

I've written extensively about the Holocaust and have cautioned readers through my work that the real enemy, especially for us Jews, is fascism. It's quicksand that will surely swallow us whole. Researching this book I came to understand things about communist systems I had overlooked before, perhaps conveniently. This revelation came to me in the most unlikely of places. Budapest, Hungary.

On a trip with my adult son to visit and discover the places where my grandparents were born we visited a museum on Budapest known by the name, The House of Terror. This museum, to be fair, was the brainchild of Victor Orban, the current prime minister of Hungary and the poster boy for today's version of fascism, "illiberal democracy." His message was suspect from the outset.

The museum is located in the former grand city mansion of a wealthy Hungarian Jewish family. The home was confiscated by the Nazis in 1944 and immediately converted to the Budapest headquarters of the Gestapo. Their torture chambers are located in the basement. When the Nazis fled in 1945, the building was immediately turned over the Hungarian communist secret police.

Orban's alternative reality erases the lines between fascism and communism and views Hungary as an occupied nation from 1944-1989. Of course, that's simply not true. What I did come to understand though was that while the two systems may have diametrically opposed economic systems, they share the same system of social control. No dissent is permitted. There is only one, unified, acceptable way to think. That is the great tragedy of communism. Despite what communist systems such as Castro's may have accomplished for the betterment of their people, those accomplishments are dwarfed, eclipsed, by the loss of all personal freedom and the enlistment of large numbers of citizens to inform on their neighbors, friends, family, and co-workers.

5. JBC: What real events are *Incident at San Miguel* based on?

AJ: *Incident at San Miguel* is based on the real-life relationship between brothers Juan and Solomon Bradman and their families in Cuba from just before the revolution through Juan's escape with his family in 1962 and the 2001 reunion of the brothers in New York City. I like to leave the reader with the task of determining what events are real and what has been fictionalized. I suggest that readers read both Miriam Bradman Abrahams' Foreword, and my Historical Notes at the beginning of the book, and the Acknowledgements at the end of the book to get a fuller picture of what's real and what's been fictionalized. I will give the reader this advance notice. The Cuban Revolution is real. It happened. The actual incident at San Miguel is not. That's literary license.

6. JBC: Do you intend to write more books about the Cuban Revolution?

AJ: In all likelihood, no, I won't write another book about the Cuban Revolution. Unless someone brings me a story so good I can't say no. I'm often asked this question about writing another Holocaust Book. At this juncture, I have no hard plans for another Holocaust book, though I do have an idea for one lurking in my head. It's saying, "write me," and I'm saying, "I need a break," so, the next project is a book about baseball. A novel. The story is about a young Dominican boy who makes it to the major leagues through the Dominican baseball academies. I just spent a month in the Dominican Republic researching it. And it's based on the son of a friend there who signed with the majors last year.

7. JBC: Much of your work has a Latin slant. What's that about?

AJ: As you may know my uncle was a refugee from the Nazis in Sosua, Dominican Republic. His experiences were the basis for *Forgiving Maximo Rothman*. I've been connected to the Dominican Republic all my life. I visit there each winter. My best friend is Dominican. I stay at his home and immerse myself in that world. It's a great way to disconnect and recharge. One friend says about me, "he was born in the wrong country!" I feel very connected when I'm there, to a simpler way of life. It inspires me.

8. JBC: Is there one thing you'd like for your work to accomplish out in the world?

AJ: Yes, of course, actually two. One is to touch my readers, to keep them connected to the ultimate humanity of good people. When someone tells me they are moved by my work, it makes me feel it's all so worthwhile.

9. JBC: What's the second?

AJ: I'd like my books to be made into series on Netflix or Amazon, Hulu, HBO, or whatever. I'm not picky, so if you know anyone, please pass that along.