



Santa Evita

Tomás Eloy Martínez

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Among the great corpses of our age are Lenin, Mao Tse-tung and Stalin. Mao, at least, is still on view for the masses to see, some two decades after his demise. But no corpse engendered as much intrigue as that of Eva Peron. Elevated to near sainthood in Argentina after her death in 1952, her perfectly preserved corpse was seized by the Argentine Army following the ouster of her husband in 1955. By then her corpse had acquired the status of a sacred relic, and while army officials wanted to keep it out of the hands of Peronists, they were loath to destroy the corpse for fear of the backlash that might follow. Tomas Eloy Martinez has reassembled the story of the corpse of Eve Peron in *Santa Evita*, and in the process, produced a riveting, rich book that not only tells the tale of one of the more bizarre sagas in the history of South American politics, but that also gets to the heart of the age-old human impulse to create myths and tell stories.

Santa Evita Details

Date : Published July 15th 2010 by ALFAGUARA (first published 1995)

ISBN :

Author : Tomás Eloy Martínez

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Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review Santa Evita for online ebook

James says

'Santa Evita' is a great novel blending fact and fiction about the life, or more precisely - the death and thereafter of Eva Peron. Wonderfully written compelling narrative, this is a bizarre but fascinating world where truth seems often stranger than fiction - the world of Eva Peron, the cult of Evita, the mythology of Santa Evita.

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Karen Elisabet says

"Caminaba siempre un paso detrás del marido, pero él parecía la sombra, el revés de la medalla."

Read for the Popsugar Challenge 2018, challenge number 6: a novel based on a real person (*María Eva Duarte de Perón*).

Maritza Buendia says

"Santa Evita" es una mezcla entre novela, biografía y reportaje sociopolítico de una turbulenta época en Argentina. Una historia que entrelaza datos de Evita Perón viva y muerta. Viva, desde su humilde infancia, su lucha por realizar sus sueños de artista hasta su encuentro con Juan Perón que daría un vuelco a su vida para convertirla en un ícono político. Y es también la historia del cadáver de Eva Perón desde que su ilustre esposo la puso en manos de un embalsamador, hasta su recorrido errante de aventuras inverosímiles que hace por varios países. Un cuerpo que fue copiado, escondido, profanado y hasta amado por el Coronel Koenig: un loco, alcohólico y verdugo, cuya obsesión por protegerlo lo convierte en un personaje necrófilo y perturbador.

La historia narra sobre las idiosincrasias de un pueblo profundamente dividido. Sobre un personaje ambiguo, visto por unos como un símbolo de salvación y por otros de su perdición: amado y despreciado, pero sin lugar a dudas afianzado en la imaginación de todos. Una leyenda que trasciende el tiempo. Un relato cuya veracidad, como la vida propia, es una mezcla entre la realidad y lo inventado: la memoria que tergiversa y engaña para poder darle significado a lo vivido y para seguir viviendo.

El libro es fascinante; su prosa es mágica y contiene citas inolvidables que perduran en la imaginación del lector. Un relato conmovedor que inquieta. La catarsis de una obsesión. Muy recomendable.

K.D. Absolutely says

My fascination on Evita Peron started when I heard Julie Covington sang "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" over the radio when I was still in high school. Since our island-town had no electricity, i.e., no television, yet and almost no FM radio stations reached us during daytime, we contented ourselves with listening to whatever was played on the AM dials. Since there was nothing else to be busied about aside from studying, helping in the household chores and some puppy loves, listening and scrutinizing songs played on the radio were almost the only hobbies every student in our high school had.

Who is this lady and why is she asking for a country Argentina not to cry for her? My dad, who loved sad songs, really liked this song too and he told me that it was a song supposedly sang by the former lady of Argentina, a Latin American country. I had no interest on global events then so I just let it pass.

Fast forward to 1996. I was already a father of an infant when Madonna starred in Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita* and this song became number 1 in the Billboard Chart:

The movie answered many of the questions that I had regarding Evita Peron. The movie came out 10 years after President Marcos left the Malacanang Palace during the 1986 People Power revolution but the memories of her wife, Imelda Marcos, were still fresh in people's minds. Somehow, comparisons to these two ladies came so easily that a similar stage play, *Meldita* was also staged and later an independent film, *Imelda* was also shown.

Back to Evita and Argentina.

After the song has been sung by many artist after Covington, the play has hit the Broadway and West End several times and the 1996 movie starring Madonna, we all know about Evita Peron's life: born as **Eva Duarte** a bastard, she became a prostitute in her early years in Buenos Aires, worked as a radio, stage and movie actress before she met the political fast-rising star, Coronel Juan Peron during a charity ball for the victims of an earthquake. They fell in love and she used her charm as a former peasant and worker to win the votes of her *descamisados* "shirtless workers." She was being drafted as a Vice Presidential (to her husband) candidate when she was diagnosed of having cervical cancer. In 1927, she was 15 when she left her small hometown Junin to try her luck in Buenos Aires, married Juan Peron at 23 (1945) and died of cervical cancer at the age of 33 (1955).

Although Argentine journalist and novelist Tomas Eloy Martinez (1924-2010) basically focused on what happened to Evita Peron's corpse after her death, he used a lot of flashbacks detailing the same story covered in the play and in the movie. The real protagonist of this book, however, was not the living Evita but the dead Evita. After all, the corpse of a popular political figure sometimes become dangerous after the person's death. (*President Marcos knew this when people rallied behind President Corazon Aquino after the death her husband Senator Ninoy Aquino in 1984.*)

The *rumor* was that since Evita Peron was really the "star" of Peron's presidency, when President Peron lost her, his career would have ended too. So, whoever would have the possession of her corpse would have the power. What President Peron did was to have a least 3 replicas of the corpse already ready even prior to

Evita's death. So, this book is actually about those four corpses and what they went through. One corpse was buried. One was smuggled abroad. One was kept by a colonel to himself. One was mummified by a major who was so in love with Evita at he tried to use egyptology powers to resurrect the corpse from death. He even killed his own wife when he was discovered to be spending almost of his waking moments in the attic with Evita Peron's corpse.

These were actually rumors because as per Martinez's admission in the book, he actually only met the two people, President Peron and Evita, among all those who he used as characters in this book. This was probably the reason why he did not make this a biography but a novel. As he, as the book's narrator, explained it towards the book's last few pages: *As you said, it's a novel. In novels, what is true is also false. Authors rebuild at night the same myths they've destroyed in the morning.*"

It is an easy read and one that you will not have a hard time following when you are coming back to it regardless after how many days in between reads. Maybe because of the songs, the play, the movies and all the previous knowledge you have about the well-loved (or well-hated according to her detractors) first lady in Argentine history. For me, the fact that she was able to rally many people to vote for her husband was a marked of a true leader and she deserves to be remembered. For her followers, she was even so loved that they thought of her as a saint. That explains the title: ***Santa Evita***

The picture taken when she was the First Lady of Argentina in 1945 at the age of 23.

Manuel De la rosa says

Una historia apasionante, llena de misterio y realidad. La narración de la aventura después de la muerte, pero también la descripción de una vida antes del final.

Santa Evita es una biografía de Eva Perón y una guía de los lugares y recorridos que su cuerpo embalsamado recorrió. Llena de hechos verídicos mezclados con momentos novelescos, Santa Evita nos muestra una radiografía completa de Evita.

Nada EL Shabrawi says

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Emily says

As intrigued as I was by the idea of a novel whose main character is a corpse, the parts of Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* that ended up interesting me most had almost nothing to do with its so-called plot. Because as much as *Santa Evita* is a novel "about" the late wife of a deposed politician (in which an ensemble cast of characters transport, steal, curse, duplicate, switch, covet, and defile the embalmed body of Eva Perón, in a non-chronological seesaw back and forth over the pivot-point of her death), it's also a playful, extended essay that meditates on the nature of storytelling itself: what makes a story "true"; when

are sources "reliable"; exactly how real is "reality," and what is its relationship to text? Late in the novel, two characters have this exchange:

"As you said, it's a novel," I explained. "In novels, what is true is also false. Authors rebuild at night the same myths they've destroyed in the morning."

"Those are just words," Corominas said emphatically. "They don't convince me. The only thing that means anything are facts, and a novel, after all, is a fact."

Throughout *Santa Evita*, Martínez is grappling with just this question: to what extent is a novel an amorphous web of myths and legends, capable of telling "truth" only metaphorically, through a recreated web of lies? And on the contrary, to what extent is a novel a tangible, solid fact, capable of being argued with, contradicted, analyzed? To what extent can these two states coexist? At first, I assumed Martínez to be making a case for the lack of connection between reality and fiction, a case that, since a novel cannot recreate reality exactly, any wild fiction will say as much about reality as the most careful reportage. I saw him portraying the role of the author, as stated above by the character "Tomás Eloy Martínez," as someone destroying and rebuilding the same mythos over and over—a kind of impotent yet all-powerful Lady of Shalott, interacting with reality only at a vast remove. I heard him telling me not to look in his pages for a *literal* truth about Evita Perón, because written language can't transmit literal truth, but to seek instead for salient metaphors.

That, I thought, is where written language falls short. It can bring back to life feelings, lost time, chance circumstances that link one fact to another, but it can't bring reality back to life. I didn't yet know—and it would take longer still for me to feel it—that reality doesn't come back to life: it is born in a different way, it is transfigured, it reinvents itself in novels. I didn't know that the syntax or the tones of voice of the characters return with a different air about them and that, as they pass through the sieves of written language, they become something else.

They become "something else"—but what relation does this "something else" hold to its original model? Is it "only" the stuff of myths, reflecting what the audience needs or believes rather than the experience of the original human? Is there, indeed, any "reality" inherent in the subjective experience of an individual, or any reality that should be privileged above the transfigured reality of history and myth? If I felt frightened in a given situation, and a storyteller tells a convincing version of my story in which I feel instead angry or tender, are those two versions of my story different but equal? Or is one more "real" than the other?

With the response of Corominas above, I realized that Martínez's stance is more complicated than I had at first assumed. True, the "real people" who feature as characters in this novel are different than their actual real-life counterparts, but different in a way not easy to articulate. They are "transfigured," but only incompletely, problematically. Their transfiguration doesn't replace one thing (the dead reality) with another (a new reality), but layers new perspectives on top of old until "reality" becomes a palimpsest of texts and real-life events inscribing themselves on top one another *ad infinitum*. About the Peróns' marriage certificate, for example, the narrator writes:

The marriage is not false, but almost everything the document says is, from beginning to end. At the most solemn and historical moment of their lives, the contracting parties, as the phrase was in those days, decided to perpetrate an Olympian hoax on history. Perón lied about the place where the ceremony was performed and about his civil status; Evita lied about her age, her place of residence, the city she had been born in. Their statements were obviously false, but twenty years went by before anyone questioned them. In 1974, in his book *Perón, the Man of Destiny*, the biographer Enrique Pavón Pereyra nonetheless declared that they were true. [...] They lied because they had decided that, from that moment on, reality would be what they wanted it to be. They did the same thing novelists do.

In Martínez's analysis, the marriage certificate is a figurative "novel": it represents something true (the marriage between Juan and Eva Perón), which is nonetheless made up entirely of lies. And yet, Martínez's own narrative goes on to demonstrate that the Peróns' power to dictate their own reality by fiat was limited: "deciding reality would be what they wanted it to be" could not stop the rumors of illegitimacy that plagued Evita's public image, could not elide the age difference between them or erase the existence of Juan's first wife. These issues could not be declared away; on the other hand, as Martínez points out, the marriage itself was incontrovertibly real.

In other words, I believe Martínez is arguing for a middle ground between the collective and the individual, between "what's-true-is-also-false" and "novel-as-fact." The Peróns exercise real power in dictating their identities via their marriage certificate, but that power also has real limits. Text is an interactive part of reality, although it cannot replace reality or even, necessarily, represent it directly. A novelist cannot repeat reality, so he invents it again; but he cannot reinvent it in a way unconnected from the reality that came before. And once he reinvents it, the new reality exists somewhere between his invention and the state that preceded it; neither can exist without the other.

One of my favorite intersections of reality and text (or actually, text and meta-text) happens throughout the first half of the novel, when the narrator is repeatedly struck by the resemblance between real-life events and the Jorge Luis Borges story "Death and the Compass." Initially, the narrator only mentions the story as a passing reference to the way in which Peronism influenced Borges himself:

Without Perón's terror, Borges's labyrinths and mirrors would lose a substantial part of their meaning. Without Perón, Borges's writing would lack provocations, refined techniques of indirection, perverse metaphors.

But the similarities between *Santa Evita* and "Death and the Compass" become stronger as the character of Colonel Moori Koenig is fleshed out. A little background: in Borges's story, a detective becomes obsessed with the murder of a rabbi who died surrounded by kabbalistic books, and with two subsequent murders that seem to be connected to the first. In a Poirot-style exercise, he confounds his action-based colleagues by "solving" the murders using only textual analysis of the late rabbi's books, and the application to a map of the city a geometrical cypher based on equilateral triangles and rhombi. All this only to find, when he arrives at the murderer's lair, that the whole series of crimes has been a setup, engineered to trick him to his own death; the entire narrative leading him into the villain's obsessively symmetrical labyrinth lair has been false.

Similarly, the narrator in Martínez's novel initially notes that Colonel Koenig becomes obsessed with an

assignment that leads to his own destruction. But the similarities don't stop there: it turns out that the Colonel, like Borges's villain, is obsessed with symmetry, even going so far as to excuse a freakish swarm of bees on the excuse that "the bees were not disrupting the symmetrical order of life." He superstitiously avoids saying Evita's name, even in his own mind, an aversion that mirrors the Orthodox Jewish prohibition on uttering the Name of God. Later on, when trying to dispose of Evita's body and its copies, the Colonel actually employs almost the *exact same* geometrical cypher to a map of Buenos Aires that Borges's detective did in "Death and the Compass." At this point, as readers, we are reacting not only to the likelihood of such symmetry between a fictional Colonel and a fictional detective, but remembering that Martínez's narrative is to some extent based on FACT—did this scene from Borges actually come to life? The narrator himself interrupts his informant, Cifuentes, to remark on the surreal similarity between the Colonel's real-life actions and Borges's short story—doesn't Cifuentes think it incredible that both men overlaid equilateral triangles/rhombi on a map of the city?

He refused to concede the fact. Although I have read little Borges, he said [or rather lied], I have some memory of that story. I know that it is influenced by the Kabbala and by Hasidic traditions. To the Colonel, the slightest allusion to anything Jewish would have been unacceptable. His plan was inspired by Paracelsus, who is Luther's counterpart, and at the same time the most Aryan of Germans. The other difference, he said to me, is more important. Detective Lönnrot's ingenious game in "Death and the Compass" is a deadly one, but it takes place only within a text. What the Colonel was plotting was to happen, however, outside of literature, in a real city through which an overwhelmingly real body was to be transported.

The layers of irony are almost overwhelming here, but let me try to unpack them. First of all, Cifuentes's response highlights a huge difficulty with transfiguring any set of events into story-hood: who can agree on which elements are "key"? To me, it's a pretty incredible coincidence that a real-life Colonel would happen across the same bizarre, geometric method of corpse-disposal as one used in a particular short story; the equilateral triangles/rhombi, the obsession with symmetry, the aversion to saying a given name, all line up quite eerily. But to Cifuentes, these points are irrelevant because the Colonel was anti-Semitic and the details of Borges's story concerned Judaism. Not only is this ironic because the Jewish backdrop of the story seems (to me) a petty detail, but also because, within Borges's own context, it turns out to be totally faked—the murders actually involve no kabbalistic attempt to know the name of God; they are just a ploy to murder the main character.

What's more, Cifuentes's second objection takes on a layer of irony given that, as he and his narrative are transfigured into parts of Martínez's novel, the events he describes ARE taking place within literature, and for all the reader knows, they may be just as fictional as those evoked by Borges! And can we really claim that Eva Péron's body is "overwhelmingly real" when it has been artificially preserved to the point when nobody can tell the difference between it and a wax copy? To top it all off, Cifuentes's entire denial of the "Death and the Compass" similarities is rendered suspect by Martínez's own parenthetical claim that Cifuentes is lying about how much Borges he has read.

In short, the Argentine mantle of meta cast off by Borges and Cortázar has obviously not been abandoned. A big thanks to Richard for introducing me to the next generation of South American literary mind-games in the shape of Tomás Eloy Martínez and *Santa Evita*.

Sarah ~ says

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**Derek says**

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## Thea Guanzon says

I am normally quite a fast reader but it took me AGES to finish this book. I kept getting distracted by inconsequential matters every few pages. However, I don't count that as a negative because it lends a certain credibility to the mystique of Eva Peron that Martinez emphasizes, the difficulty in pinning her down, the

ease with which she left all those who tried to keep her. Goodness, this novel sure hit all the right spots for me: politics, surrealism, science, history, romance, multiple languages and intrigue. It's a curious blend of hard facts, eroticism, speculation and the magical realism that is such a trademark of Latin American literature. There are a few glitches in writing style but I'm willing to give that a pass as my copy is translated from the Spanish and has therefore lost some of its nuances. On the whole, though, Martinez' prose as rendered by Helen Lane is poetic, moving and elegant. I've lost count of the number of times I genuinely got chills or almost burst into tears from the sheer beauty of a certain passage. Evita has always fascinated me, and this book definitely does her justice. I can't recommend it highly enough. People might be turned off by the encompassing plot, the huge cast of characters, the scattered and non-linear structure or the reckless way Martinez tends to break the fourth wall, but all those are part of why I love *Santa Evita* so much; the reader has to fight for the story, has to tease it out and untangle it. This is a tale of rise and descent, of faith and madness, of a country and of the woman who begged it not to weep. This is the kind of book that one needs to take the time to absorb and reflect upon. Much like Evita Peron itself, it is in turns vulgar and graceful, infuriating and exhilarating, and completely unforgettable.

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### **Angela McCallum says**

Really interesting book about the strange journey that Eva Peron's corpse took after Peron was overthrown. T. Eloy Martinez reminds us throughout the novel that truth is elusive. We may never really know what happened to her corpse during its 22-year journey because much like Eva herself, who became Evita (remembered more for what people said she did than for what she actually did) the tales surrounding her embalmed corpse are so fantastical they can't be true, or can they?

I also learned a lot about that period of Argentina's history and why people so love or so hate Evita. In terms of understanding Argentines and Argentinean culture, this book is fantastic. Absolutely eye-opening, jaw-dropping, page-turning... you know, add whichever cliché you like best and it will probably fit here.

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### **Rafael says**

No sé en qué momento exactamente mi imaginación de niño o adolescente se maravilló con la figura de Eva Perón. Recuerdo haber oído a Licha platicarme del dictador argentino depuesto y refugiado en España y tengo una vaga conciencia de haber leído en alguna revista en la peluquería mientras esperaba turno, un reportaje sobre el embalsamamiento del cadáver de Eva Perón.

Esta historia, como la de Rasputín y otras que Licha me platicaba y cuyo conocimiento servía de acicate para nuevas lecturas, estaba ahí en alguna parte de mi memoria esperando, sin saberlo, topar con nuevos datos. Por los caprichos del azar no dí con nada interesante hasta que leí el libro de "Contra Viento y Marea" de Vargas Llosa. En ese libro Vargas Llosa comenta que leyó Santa Evita de Tomás Eloy Martínez, esto me llevó a buscar el libro y leerlo. En realidad en dos etapas.

En la primera, tomé el libro para leerlo en el avión en un viaje a Francia; había avanzado como la mitad de la lectura cuando llegué a Toulouse y fui atendido a cuerpo a cuerpo por mis amigos Touzeau. Daniel, al final de una de las exquisitas comidas y conversaciones, se levantó, fue al librero, tomó un volumen, muy bien encuadrado de las confesiones de Rousseau y me lo obsequió. Ese gesto selló la suerte de mi ejemplar de Santa Evita, se quedó en Toulouse.

Meses después compré nuevamente el libro y lo llevé en un viaje a Acapulco, ahí no se lo regalé a nadie. Completé su lectura.

Santa Evita tiene al menos tres hilos conductores del relato, el principal es la suerte que sigue el cadáver embalsamado de Eva Perón, pero no es la única trama narrativa; el libro va dando también su versión de algunos hechos históricos con Eva Perón viva, como sus audiencias para dar casas y recursos a la gente del pueblo, que recuerdan conocidas prácticas clientelares de la política mexicana, recientes y antiguas. Su obligada renuncia a la candidatura a la vicepresidencia, los celos políticos de Perón, el disgusto de los militares y una prolífica descripción de su enfermedad.

En algunos otros pasajes nos enteramos también como vivía Eva Duarte en su pueblo natal, con su mamá, de su huida a Buenos Aires con un cantante que la mantiene como amante clandestina porque es menor de edad, de cómo conoce y seduce al viudo Perón, después de penar en busca de oportunidades artísticas que incluyen las de posar para revistas masculinas.

Además de los dos anteriores ejes narrativos, Tomás Eloy Martínez incluye su reflexión introspectiva para contarle al lector sus dificultades en entrevistar a algún personaje, la manera como consiguió un documento, su amistad con algún testigo o hasta amores con la hija de un antiguo conocido que resulta ser importante en la reconstrucción de ésta historia que conmovió a Argentina, toda.

Incluye el autor reflexiones sobre la literatura y la vida cultural de Argentina. Me llamó la atención su referencia a algunas obras anteriores de ficción sobre el cadáver de Eva Perón, como “Esa Mujer” de Rodolfo Walsh, que narra la desgracia de un Coronel enamorado de un cadáver que debe vigilar y que entierra finalmente en algún lugar de Europa. Habla también de la semejanza del cuento de Walsh con “La Muerte y la Brújula” de Borges, de quien dice: “ Todos los relatos que Borges compuso en esa época reflejan la indefensión de un ciego ante las amenazas bárbaras del Peronismo”.

Sugiere, el autor de Santa Evita, una especie de maleficio que se cierne sobre todo aquel que tiene que ver con esta historia del cadáver de Eva Duarte -Persona- como la llamaba el Coronel Moori Koenig principal verdugo y víctima del cadáver. Ese maleficio no le hace dispensa tampoco al mismísimo Tomás Eloy, quien resulta víctima de varias calamidades y depresiones hasta estar a punto de abandonar la empresa de escribir el libro. Por supuesto no creo nada del supuesto maleficio y no se si es cierto todo lo que se platica del cadáver, pero la verdad es que de acuerdo a lo que narra el libro, todos los que tienen que ver con el cadáver tienen alguna desgracia: se quema su casa, asesinan a su mujer, se vuelven alcohólicos, etc.

El principal verdugo y víctima es el Coronel Koenig, enamorado del cadáver.

Un cadáver aun más bello que la mujer que fue. Rodeado de un halo de vapores azulosos y metálicos producidos por las sustancias que la habitaban para luchar contra la descomposición de la carne.

Respondiendo con la soledad y terquedad de la muerte a todos los halagos, denuestos y vejaciones de sus custodios. Algo ciertamente para enloquecer, lo mismo a su embalsamador, Pedro Ara que a otros de sus custodios; todos los cuales, al decir del relato, celebraban esponsales periódicos y frecuentes con el cadáver. Koenig además orina sobre el cuerpo inerte, lo que le vale la destitución y destierro.

Las peripecias del cadáver no son solo de tipo sexual, aunque son quizás las más impresionantes, por las mismas razones que el sexo es siempre más atrayente.

Hay también la componente del miedo que produce a quienes derrocaron a Perón, el que alguien pueda robar el cadáver y darle un uso político: Ponerlo al frente de una gran manifestación popular y hacerse con el poder. Por eso el paradero del cadáver es considerado Secreto de Estado, por eso, dice el relato, se fabricaron copias en cera del cadáver embalsamado y se enterraron con diferentes nombres en varios sitios distintos, incluido alguno en Europa.

Estas necrológicas vicisitudes son las que va siguiendo el libro, acompañándolas de relatos históricos y de las reflexiones del autor sobre la escritura del texto, creando una atmósfera de misterio sobre qué va a pasar con el cuerpo, cómo regresará a Argentina. Por lo mismo se lee rápido, aunque al final resulta un poco decepcionante.

Lo que me deja al final el libro es la conciencia de lo difícil que es platicar La Historia en mayúsculas de cualquier cosa, lo que hay siempre son versiones de una historia. Está es la versión de Tomás Eloy a partir de las versiones que escuchó y documentos que analizó. Mientras tanto Eva Perón y su cadáver seguirán -al margen de cualquier pretendida verdad histórica- siendo leyenda, hasta que el poder, el sexo y la muerte nos

dejen de facinar.

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