

A Wrap of *Cigar City Stories*

We all have a story. We start as a point, become a place and soon our identity wraps around the world in such a way that the simplest image of a boy delivering newspapers from his Schwinn Phantom begins to represent us all. In *Cigar City Stories: Tales of Old Ybor City*, Emilio Gonzalez-Llanes explores his childhood identity while capturing far more than the red-bricked streets crossing the hometown of his youth.

Ybor City, Florida of the 1940s is a place of intersection, a factory town with a Spanish/English/Italian daily newspaper. The threads of communism weave their way through the working class as they gossip over *café con leches*. Their anger and protests become visible and bubble to the surface through courageous acts of defiance. This collection of short stories and poems begins beautifully, as the blank canvas of a new white apron is draped over the shoulders of our narrator. Finally old enough to be trusted with money, he takes a position at the register of Jose's Fruteria. There he stands as an unbiased eye, watching the events and outcome of a robbery at a cigar factory across the street. Through the mysteries of the crime, he quickly learns about the realities of life as an adult in a dangerous, vibrant and complex world.

Gonzales-Llanes is aware of his position as an observer in writing these stories, and he effectively balances the narrators' innocence against the more mature themes. "Streetcar" begins at a distance, through the viewfinder of a Brownie Hawkeye Camera, but by the end - after a wild ride through a bustling neighborhood on a streetcar stolen by his mother - he graduates to a Nikon 35mm. The world is expanding, and this young boy's abilities of perception are, as well.

The reader quickly learns to trust this journey through Ybor City, largely in part to the entirely different story unfolding emotionally within the narrative. Simmering beneath each story is a boy bravely claiming, "I want to be like Robin, live in a cave with Batman and share a life of

crime-fighting.” The flickering vulnerabilities brought about by the neighborhood bully, skinny-dipping with another boy, and a sleepover with a very understanding friend become just as definitive as the kidnappings, duels and robberies populating the day-to-day scheme of Ybor City. The counterpoint of these two very different worlds proves to be far more influential, interdependent and supportive than one would initially expect. Gonzales-Llanes has taken a beautiful snapshot across many levels and has captured that the world we inhabit is pivotal to the world we create.

Just this past summer, Ybor City made the news as a place of protest along the route of a political convention. While it is a more progressive place than neighboring Tampa, it was still a city permanently changed during the Urban Renewal of the 1960s, and it is facing a contemporary wash of gentrification today. One might argue that there is unification of identity as a result of this “modernization,” but after experiencing the vibrant lifestyles and cultures of the Ybor City of the past, an idea of delicate importance is reinforced: that we all have more than one story to tell.