



Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes  
A Review by Peter Fiore, OFM

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The central figure of "Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes" is Daniel Quinn, a young journalist who becomes involved in the Cuban Revolution in 1957 and the free speech and civil rights movement in Albany in 1968. This is the eighth novel, and the first in nine years, in Kennedy's epic Albany Cycle, the third of which, "Ironweed," won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1984. Taken together, the novels are a witty and vivid portrait of Kennedy's birthplace, the state capital of New York, over a period of a century. "Chango's Beads..." has for its cast of characters all the same losers, crooked politicians, gangsters, priests, street people, bums, and big shots of Kennedy's previous novels. New characters find themselves here, Bing Crosby, Ernest Hemingway, and Fidel Castro and they give the novel additional depth and charm. Kennedy's balancing the two revolutions in one narrative is a stroke of genius. The work is brilliant.

The novel consists of three unequal parts of Daniel Quinn's life. The first, consisting of only six pages, occurs in Albany in October 1936, when Quinn is eight. The second occurs in Havana in March 1957, where Quinn has gone as a reporter in search of a story and where he encounters revolutionaries, gun-runners, corrupt government officials, Hemingway, and Cuba's rising star, Fidel Castro. (Actually Kennedy became a friend of Castro and many of the events in the whole novel are from Kennedy's life) He falls in love with the "dangerously beautiful" woman, a revolutionary gun-runner named Renata, who will become his wife. Indeed they are married within a few days in a Santeria ceremony evoked in the book's title: Chango is a leading Santeria deity, "a warrior who helps people in trouble."

The story's third part then jumps from Cuba to New York, Albany specifically, on that tragic day, June 5, 1968, the day Bobby Kennedy was shot. Quinn is once again on familiar turf, a city on the verge of exploding with civil unrest and race riots, political corruption with clerical meddling, drugs, homelessness, and poverty. This third part of the book goes for over 200 pages and like Joyce's "Ulysses" takes place in one day. The narrative continues its theme of contrasting revolutions and is interestingly populated with characters we have come to expect from Kennedy fiction: angry civil rights activists, radical Catholic priests, alcoholics, prostitutes, drug runners, colorful friends and devoted family members.

This later section is of particular interest to Albany readers, especially the Siena community. When Quinn becomes involved with the Albany Democratic machine for its indifference to the poor, especially the black poor, he encounters a "Reverend Matthew Daugherty, OFM (name changed), voluble, forty-four-year-old Franciscan professor of religion and theology at Siena College, built for football, hard-charging, soft-spoken rebel of the faith..." Quinn discusses the silencing of the priest (stay away from the inner city, teach your classes, shut your mouth) by his Franciscan superiors, obviously a command that had originated with the Albany diocese. There are many of us still around who recall the turbulent issue and the pain it caused. Quinn (Kennedy) handles it well and with honesty.

This is a wonderful book from the pen of one of America's greatest writers. It is significant that it begins when the eight year old Quinn (Kennedy) meets the great crooner Bing Crosby and experiences an unforgettable night of song that will reverberate in his soul the rest of his life. Just scan the pages of the book and names like Fats Waller, the Mills Brothers, Satchmo, Marian Anderson, and Jimmy Durante jump from the pages. This not only reveals Kennedy's love of show business and movies but helps account for the lyrical quality of the author's prose. The Irish lilt and lyricism of his previous novels is here and make this his most musical work of fiction. If you can imagine a great symphony made up of memory and nostalgia, comedy and drama, of civil right, politics, and revolution, of love, compassion, and redemption then you have "Chango's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes." A really worthwhile read.

Reviewer:

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