



Thoughts Without Cigarettes

Oscar Hijuelos

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The beloved Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist turns his pen to the real people and places that have influenced his life and, in turn, his literature. Growing up in 1950's working-class New York City to Cuban immigrants, Hijuelos journey to literary acclaim is the evolution of an unlikely writer.

Oscar Hijuelos has enchanted readers with vibrant characters who hunger for success, love, and self-acceptance. In his first work of nonfiction, Hijuelos writes from the heart about the people and places that inspired his international bestselling novels.

Born in Manhattan's Morningside Heights to Cuban immigrants in 1951, Hijuelos introduces readers to the colorful circumstances of his upbringing. The son of a Cuban hotel worker and exuberant poetry-writing mother, his story, played out against the backdrop of an often prejudiced working-class neighborhood, takes on an even richer dimension when his relationship to his family and culture changes forever. During a sojourn in pre-Castro Cuba with his mother, he catches a disease that sends him into a Dickensian home for terminally ill children. The yearlong stay estranges him from the very language and people he had so loved.

With a cast of characters whose stories are both funny and tragic, *Thoughts Without Cigarettes* follows Hijuelos's subsequent quest for his true identity into adulthood, through college and beyond—a mystery whose resolution he eventually discovers hidden away in the trappings of his fiction, and which finds its most glorious expression in his best-known book, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Illuminating the most dazzling scenes from his novels, *Thoughts Without Cigarettes* reveals the true stories and indelible memories that shaped a literary genius.

Thoughts Without Cigarettes Details

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From Reader Review Thoughts Without Cigarettes for online ebook

Nina says

Reading Thoughts Without Cigarettes is like sitting in a bar listening to people tell stories. Hijuelos takes us from his childhood through winning the Pulitzer for *Mambo Kings*. He shares his sense of always being an outsider—he doesn't physically resemble the Cuban prototype, he loses touch with the Spanish language—which impacted his development as a writer. After reading Hijuelos' fiction, it is difficult to imagine that he wasn't driven, wasn't determined to capture the Cuban immigrant experience. He was pushed by mentors into using his heritage in his writing.

Before Hijuelos started writing he was a musician. He came of age in the 60s and 70s, and his love of music infuses his writing stylistically as well as topically. His sentences are lyrical, rhythmic, pulsating, and filled with lush description.

I was astounded to learn that, not realizing the importance and prestige of the University of Iowa writing program, Hijuelos passed up opportunities to attend.

His memoir is as much a story about the desire for love and acceptance as any of his novels. It is also a wonderful, haunting elegy to the memory of his father, who died suddenly when Hijuelos was still a teenager.

Richard Jaspers says

I made few annotations in this book largely because I found it so engrossing I didn't want to stop to write a note. I'll do that another time. Mr. Hijuelos is a unique character among writers, among human beings. He is a Cuban-American who suffers a disease in childhood that takes him away from his family for such a long period that he forgets much of the Spanish he's learned. He suffers his entire life because he cannot fully communicate with his own mother whose English is poor. He suffers from his own self-deprecation, turning down Donald Barthelme's offer to help Hijuelos enter the graduate writing program at Iowa University. He is also stunned when he later wins highly touted awards, among them the Pulitzer Prize for his novel, *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Hijuelos shares all the pain and sorrow that other writers may suffer: loss of his father, the slings and arrows of racism (in a very odd twist because of his blond hair and light skin, not being dark enough for some, too Latino for others), initial failures as a fledgling writer. But if he suffers, he also experiences particular joys: being told by those who should know that he has a unique talent, a two-year grant that allows him to live and write in Rome, serious relationships with three different women. Perhaps the title, Thoughts Without Cigarettes, is prescient of his death in 2013. His father died in his mid-fifties of an apparent heart attack. At the age of sixty-two, Hijuelos would drop dead from the same while playing tennis. If he quit smoking the series of cigarettes he'd begun to consume in his youth, it probably did not help him. Sad. It seems that he was a writer's writer in that he never wrote for fame, often lived from hand to mouth for his art, was not even that impressed with the accolades once the initial euphoria passed because he knew deep down that he once again had to sit his ass in a chair and write, not to make a living, but to make sense of his life.

Amber says

****I won this book through Good Reads First Reads****

This was B-O-R-I-N-G. Are his other novels (mainly The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love) this bad? Cuz tell me how did he win a Pulitzer? Maybe that it is mandatory for the award....

Anyway, the writing is so incredibly dry I could only read a few pages at a time, and I can read a book in a few hours if I enjoy it. And the name dropping throughout the ENTIRE book? I don't really care if you ate dinner with Sigorney Weaver or jammed with Duane Allman. I'm not at all impressed by an accomplished author's famous friends. Now if one of my non-famous friends were to jam with Duane Allman, that would be another story entirely.

I'm not one to give up on a book, but I came awfully close over and over again while reading this. I think this book could have been much more interesting and entertaining in a different voice.

Don't waste your time!

Lisa says

Angela's Ashes + Cuban spice

Jessica says

What Thoughts Without Cigarettes genuinely reminded me of was my childhood. Oscar Hijuelos has a very easy writing style that borders on conversation. I was taken back to the days where my grandfather used to sit around and tell stories about when he was young. Always interesting, sometimes a bit confusing, and maybe a little rambling, the stories were a part of who he was. While reading this I felt like I was transported back to that time. Except this time it was Oscar Hijuelos sitting there and sharing his history with me, and I was definitely paying attention.

I'm not a huge reader of memoirs to be honest. If I choose one, it has to hold my attention and to do that it has to be well-written. Hijuelos has a very straight, and frank writing style. Fans of memoirs will appreciate the confessional style with which he bears his soul to the reader. However this can also be a little confusing at times. There were paragraphs that I was presented with that were just one extremely long run on sentence. Also, it was tough sometimes to pin point key people in Hijelous' life, since he often ran on other tangents while telling a story. On the bright side, his writing is also very evocative and descriptive. While reading I could close my eyes and picture the run down apartment he grew up in, or the bars he frequented with their smoky rooms and sultry singers. That was definitely a key element to my appreciation of this memoir.

Even more than a story of his growing into a writer though, Thoughts Without Cigarettes is the story of a boy who becomes a man. A rags to riches tale if you will. What really drew me in was the fact that such an amazing author, such a lyrical writer, came from such a difficult life. Feeling like an outcast from your own culture is something that I was able to connect with personally, and I felt for him every step of the way in his explanation. However, Hijuelos not only shares his boyhood with us, but populates it with people who are vivid and true. Although I don't know a single one of these people personally, I feel like I met them simply through his descriptions of them. He isn't afraid to share both the good and parts of his life. Whether an event was for the better or the worse, it's all there in black and white.

I'm rambling now, so I'll wrap it up. For those of you out there who enjoy memoirs, and are looking for your next read, pick up *Thoughts Without Cigarettes*. Even if you aren't a huge fan of memoirs, this is a great one to start with. Oscar Hijuelos has a history that is definitely interesting. With some of the best descriptive writing I've seen, and a story that is deep and honest, it is well worth a read.

Amy L. Campbell says

Perhaps in an attempt to make this seem more conversational or poignant, this book was overly peppered with a plague of commas, parentheses, and emdashes. The sentence structure was so fractured as to make reading this otherwise sturdy memoir almost unbearable, but then Hijuelos himself admits that he didn't want to write it and perhaps there is a genius in writing such a work in a way that makes it almost as torturous for the reader as it must have been for the writer. I'll give you an example of one of the many stilted sentences you might encounter,

"I even took some pages I had been fooling around with to Max's one night, and visiting my friend Pete backstage in the dressing room area--a row of curtained cubicles that didn't afford much privacy at all--I met the fly Deborah Harry, lead singer of Blondie (sorry again), also on the bill, and did my best to win her favor by offering to give her the pages I had written." page 252.

At this point, I'm not even sure if Hijuelos is apologizing to Deborah Harry or to the readers for all the name dropping in that particular passage.

On the other hand, this structure did lend itself to spending a great deal of time with the author. While I can typically finish a book of this length in a few days, this took me longer than I anticipated and really made me ruminate over what the author was saying. Additionally, I'm not sure if this is a stylistic approach taken by Cuban and/or Latino authors, if so, then this is more of a problem with me reading a whole bunch of White Dudes and just being unfamiliar to the rhythms and whatevers of Non-White Dude writing. I have been exposed to White Dude, therefore I tend to like White Dude, it's a problem sometimes.

I will say that I think Hijuelos did a fantastic job of capturing the second generation American immigrant experience as well as the writerly feeling of self-loathing, even when one has Made It. It also works well to capture a specific era of American (and particularly New York) history, and that alone will make it an interesting read for those willing to put the effort into it.

Nancy says

I won this book through the goodreads first-reads contest. I entered because I enjoy memoirs. I like seeing the world from another point of view. A book by someone about my age has a particular draw. A memoir by a Pulitzer prize winner who grew up in a Cuban immigrant family in New York City promised a well written look into a world very different from the one I grew up in. I'd not read any of Hijuelos's fiction so was just looking for a peek into his world, not the story behind a novel.

Somehow Hijuelos makes much of his story rather boring. I'm not quite sure why. He reports a distance from his family, supposedly unable to speak Spanish after a year away at age 4 being treated for a kidney problem. His mother didn't speak English so all family life must have been in Spanish. I found it hard to believe that he really lost the language he spoke until he was four. Even if he truly forgot Spanish while away, a five year old easily picks up a new language. Perhaps this language thing is symbolic of something-or-other, but I

wasn't looking to analyse the author, just learn a bit about growing up in his world with maybe a bit about how he discovered he was to be a writer. I didn't get that.

Hijuelos describes his young adult self as either strikingly unambitious or totally clueless. He has amazing access to well known authors who encourage him and repeatedly offer to open doors for him. He reports passing up a number of opportunities. He does continue writing, turning down chances for advancement in his advertising work, to make sure he has time to spend writing. In the last quarter of the book he gives us a look into how he created his fiction. The final 100 pages are more engaging with descriptions of how characters and plots came to him. Hijuelos fans are likely to really appreciate this part.

If anyone picks up this book expecting a description of quitting smoking, they will be disappointed. Hijuelos describes clouds of thick smoke, frequently identifying the specific brand each person is smoking when he is setting most scenes, but he never discusses quitting. I assume he did, but maybe not.

Doreen says

I just loved reading this book. Unfortunately, I wrote a review, then succeeded in 'losing' it, so here's the shortened version. Hijuelos' writing is masterful. He writes a true memoir, engaging the reader in all his worries, confusion, triumphs, and fears, as he tells his life's story as he perceives it.

His parents are from Cuba, although he was born in the U.S. On a visit to Cuba, he contracts a disease and has to spend a year of his life at a medical facility in Connecticut. He is only four years old when this happens; a crucial point in his development. The rest of his story focuses on growing up in a household in which he often feels like an outsider. Speaking only English the year he was sick, he can no longer speak Spanish confidently. Adding to his discomfort is his own skewed identification as a light-haired, light-skinned Cuban. At times the story is humorous, but there is much sadness and regret, as well.

Hijuelos relates his story in that interesting upheaval in the world known as the 60's and 70's. The memoir continues as Hijuelos travels an indirect path to become a writer. His novel, "The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love" earns him notoriety as the first Latino to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction! His route to fame is circuitous, but the accomplished, successful people he meets along the way, make for fascinating reading. Hijuelos is adept at self-deprecation. He cleverly introduces unique, life-altering situations from his life, creating a story that reads like a personal conversation with the author. I will definitely read more of his work.

Caitlin says

I'm very fond of Oscar Hijuelos' writing. First and foremost it is evocative for me in a way much writing isn't. When I read Mr. Hijuelos I hear Celia Cruz in my head, smell smoky bars, and visualize a fantasy New York city in black-and-white tones full of noise, shadows, and smells of black beans, rice, and plantains riding on the breezes (mixing with all the other food smells one can imagine). I love the musical rhythm of his work and the intimacy of his long stream-of-consciousness sentences - as if I'm sitting on the stoop with him, smoking, and he's telling me stories.

All of this is particularly vivid in his memoir where he shares with us all his memories of growing up, of the stories and people that helped shape the writer he became. Most poignant, perhaps, is his feeling that he was

an outsider within his own culture because he was in the hospital when he was 4 and lost his language. I know a little about losing your language because my great-grandmother was Native American and mission-raised where they were ruthlessly stripped of their culture and language. Despite all of that, Mr. Hijuelos imbues his work with the colors and sounds and stories of his culture and if he's an outsider he's a really privileged and adored one.

It's a pleasure to walk along with him at night in my head - going from club to club, smoking, laughing, drinking too much beer, and listening to stories. Highly recommended.

Amanda says

Oscar Hijuelos was four years old when he contracted nephritis during a visit with family in Cuba. The resulting hospital stay would alter his life forever. He went into the hospital as a Spanish-speaking first-generation Cuban-American. After a year of being insulted and treated badly by English-speaking nurses solely because he did not understand what they said to him, he came out of the hospital as an English-speaking "former" Cuban. I was appalled at the way the nurses treated a small child because of his language and heritage. Apparently, this experience scarred him to the extent that even after returning to his Spanish-speaking home, he refused to speak even one word of Spanish, or even acknowledge that he understood it when he heard it spoken. I find it ironic that he was chastised in the hospital for not knowing English, then spent years at odds with his family for not speaking Spanish.

Due to his hospital stay, Hijuelos started school late, and unable to read either English or Spanish. He struggled with English, feeling that it was somehow forbidden to him. Despite that, he is now very articulate and even eloquent at times. I find it interesting that he didn't even like to read growing up, preferring comic books because he could see what was happening without being hampered by words. He seems to have grown out of that. He is the first Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

I liked that there were gaps in his memory and that he doesn't claim to remember or know every single thing that has ever happened. I find that this makes memoirs more believable. There was quite a lot of name-dropping, but Hijuelos did have the benefit of being involved in the NYC literary/arts community. Attending several NYC colleges and universities over the years, he also had a broader pool of students and professors than most people would have. I did get the feeling that the author became successful in spite of himself. He turns down or just plain misses opportunities that many aspiring authors would trade anything for.

This is not a dull, dry recitation of the author's life. There is some rambling from time to time, and I had to look up some of the writers mentioned as well as some of the Spanish slang. (I understood the "regular" Spanish.) Small stories of incidents woven through the book keep it interesting and often humorous. Such as when we read about how smoking an iguana out of a butchered pig ended with the entire family chasing and killing tarantulas. Or how Hijuelos sent a frustrated mugger to steal from Columbia students because City College students were too poor.

This isn't the best memoir I've ever read, but it is worth reading.

I won this book in a Goodreads First-reads giveaway.

This review is part of my Hurricane Relief Review-a-thon. <http://www.livinglearninglovinglife.c...>

Lovett.nicholas says

I read the first twenty pages of this and skipped ahead three chapters. I'm a big Hijuelos' fan, but I could really care less about someone's life through childhood and teenage years. But that's what a memoir is...

As far as a rating, I gave "Thoughts Without Cigarettes" three stars. Can you rate someone's life story? Are the events of someone's formative years to be reviewed and graded? I don't think so, and it would be pretty gutless to hang one or two stars on a memoir.

I enjoyed reading the story of his early career from his creative writing classes at CCNY to the end where he wins the Pulitzer Prize. There were some laughs, and the reading was easy. I don't know that after this book I'm any more or less interested in reading memoirs.

The form of the memoir is all about traveling down "Memory Lane" with the writer. Their travels, and how interesting their life is makes for an entertaining read, or not. There is something very indulgent about the memoir. The reader takes a backseat to the author's memories, and the form itself can only be enjoyed by the most ardent fan.

Zeek says

My interest in reading Oscar Hijuelos's memoir began because of the title- oh, and a mention on NPR. I soon realized an early 90's movie starring a young Antonio Banderas and the smoldering Armand Asante was based on OH's Pulitzer prize winning book *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*. Even better.

I loved *The Mambo Kings* movie for the sexy actors, but also for the 50's mambo atmosphere. You could almost smell the biting cigarette smoke, cheap cologne and rum tainted sweat on Armand Asante and Mamba dance halls. I was hoping for more of the same in this book as the author spoke of his Cuban background and upbringing. (Plus- the dude won a Pulitzer- how does one do that? This? I needed to know.)

However.

That atmosphere never materialized in his biography because Oscar spent much of his life denying his *Cubano*-ness. Oh not overtly, he just blended in better than most because of his paler skin. Him losing his ability to speak his native Spanish early due to prolonged stays in a convalescing home in NYC because of a childhood illness, didn't help much either. He did little to correct others assumptions as he grew up.

Aside from the homogenized life he actually lived, for me the disappointing factor in this book was that he didn't get to his writing till the last quarter of the book!

But when he did, I was hooked. Especially with all the name dropping- John Irving, John Gardner, Norman Mailer et.al. And too- the guy received a fellow- IN ROME, ITALY. (So cool and what I wouldn't give to be paid to write IN ROME! The stuff of dreams.)

I also found it fascinating how the titles for his books came to him through dreams and visions really. And he states this so matter-of-factly and in such a self effacing manner- I believe it's so! Totally inspired.

Still, there's the beginning of the book. The majority of our time in his memoir is spent on his guilt and shame of not connecting to his parents and his origins. And that's really all there is to it. How ironic the fact

that he was indeed Cuban American became the major contributing factor to him receiving the Pulitzer., imo.

However cathartic it must have been for him to write his life story, (at least- I pray- all the morose prose got him somewhere!), it just made the book tiresome.

So, 2 stars- hey, it woulda been a one star if it weren't for the ending.

Sophia says

I have a few things to say about this book.

#1: So many incredibly moving moments.

#2: So many unexpected hilarious moments. I particularly liked the anecdote where a dude tried to mug him while he was going to City College and he told the guy to take the subway or just walk down to Columbia where the students were way richer, and the mugger was like, "Hey, thanks, man!"

#3: I really respect Oscar Hijuelos for baring his soul in book form, especially since--as he detailed in the book--this was incredibly hard for him to do and sometimes not very good for his physical health.

#4: As a half-Mexican Latina who grew up with a huge disconnect from that side of myself, I struggle with my own identity all the time and have a bit of a terrified mental block about the Spanish language. I really appreciate Mexican culture, and I've done my best to learn more about it (and also learn to speak Spanish), but I rarely feel like an actual Latina. And because I'm pale and don't look super Hispanic, nobody really treats me like an actual Latina either. When they do, I out myself in about 30 seconds as not really speaking Spanish, and then we both feel awkward. Basically, I'm one of the whitest Mexicans I know, and I spend most of my time in places where I am one of few Mexicans, if not the only one. While reading this book, I realized that Oscar Hijuelos, the first Hispanic author to win the Pulitzer Prize, has struggled with very similar insecurities to my own. And I really appreciate knowing that I'm not alone, even if he still has way more Latino cred than I ever will. Also, his book cemented some new Spanish words in my head, and for that I am very grateful. I've never actually met the guy in person, and I'm sure he'll never read this, but I just wanted to say--Muchas gracias, Oscar Hijuelos, y también gracias por el libro firmado!! Y lo siento por mi español terrible.

Jessica says

Although Oscar Hijuelos is known for his fiction - his second novel, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, made him the first Latino to win the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction - this memoir was the first book of his that I'd read, and I went into it not knowing anything about him. He has an unusual story; the American-born son of Cuban immigrants, he was hospitalized for a year at age four and, during that time, surrounded by the English language, he lost his ability to speak Spanish and returned home to find he could barely communicate with his mother. He spent the rest of his childhood surrounded by Cuban culture but unable to feel a part of it - his pale skin and hair only contributed to a general sense that he wasn't like the rest of his family and neighbors.

Thoughts Without Cigarettes is something of a rags-to-riches tale; he describes the squalor of his childhood apartment in New York and admits that he barely graduated from high school, though he spent the next

several years working his way through various City University of New York institutions and became a first-generation college graduate who found himself fascinated with music and literature. To hear him tell it, he stumbled into success in spite of his efforts to the contrary - his self-doubt and lingering sense of being an outsider or impostor caused him to decline a number of opportunities along the way, ranging from the chance to study at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop to an offer to write movie scripts.

Hijuelos writes with a frank, confessional style that I found very enjoyable, though he has a tendency to let his thoughts run together so that sometimes an entire paragraph turns out to be a single meandering sentence. I couldn't always keep all of the people in his life straight and sometimes couldn't remember which person he was talking about when he'd reintroduce someone's first name several chapters later, but that didn't stop me from wanting to learn more about his life and follow the book through to the end.

I do have to admit that while I assume he quit smoking at some point, he only ever talks about what a heavy smoker he was and never actually addresses why he might have written his memoir without cigarettes, leaving me a little confused about his choice of title. I figured that at some point, him quitting smoking would become a plot point, and it never did.

Rebecca says

Getting bored with it. I WANT to be interested, but it's dragging.
