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# Before Night Falls: A Memoir



## Synopsis

The shocking memoir by visionary Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas "is a book above all about being free," said The New York Review of Books--sexually, politically, artistically. Arenas recounts a stunning odyssey from his poverty-stricken childhood in rural Cuba and his adolescence as a rebel fighting for Castro, through his suppression as a writer, imprisonment as a homosexual, his flight from Cuba via the Mariel boat lift, and his subsequent life and the events leading to his death in New York. In what The Miami Herald calls his "deathbed ode to eroticism," Arenas breaks through the code of secrecy and silence that protects the privileged in a state where homosexuality is a political crime. Recorded in simple, straightforward prose, this is the true story of the Kafkaesque life and world re-created in the author's acclaimed novels.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this powerful memoir of passions both personal and political, Cuban author Arenas ( *Hallucinations* ) describes his voyage from peasant poverty to his oppression as a dissident writer and homosexual. His voracious sexuality pervades the book (numerous encounters are described), and Arenas suggests that the gay world is instinctually non-monogamous, though he was celibate in the "monstrosity" of prison. The young Arenas, in the early days of Fidel Castro's revolution, gained his literary education working at the National Library; he then joined a fervent literary circle. The Castro regime, however, banned his first novel, *The Ill-Fated Peregrinations of Fray Servando* , and Arenas had to evade security police to smuggle manuscripts abroad for publication. Protesting

Castro's support of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Arenas suffered forced labor in the sugarcane fields, spent more than two years in prison after being prosecuted as a homosexual counterrevolutionary and managed to gain exile along with many other gays during the 1980 Mariel boatlift. Having appended a fierce denunciation to this book of those seeking dialogue with Castro, the 47-year-old Arenas, who was suffering from AIDS, committed suicide in New York City in 1990. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

This celebrated Cuban writer ( *The Doorman* , LJ 5/15/91; *Singing from the Well* , LJ 7/87), a victim of AIDS, committed suicide in New York in 1990. His autobiographical memoir is a fascinating and frightening tale of growing up extremely poor in rural Cuba, of varied personal and political relationships, of rebelliousness, homosexuality, suppression, and persecution. In the picaresque tradition, the narrative is earthy and at times raw; the frequent sexual escapades are presumably true accounts. The description of life in Havana's El Morro prison makes the skin crawl. As an author who was not only antiregime but also gay, Arenas was compelled to smuggle his work abroad for publication. More than a personal story, this memoir is an insightful analysis of the idiosyncrasies of an authoritarian regime. Recommended for literature collections.- Charles E. Perry, East Central Univ., Ada, Okla. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls* (Penguin, 1993) Arenas' memoir of life in Cuba has recently been made into one of the finest films extant by Julian Schnabel. Schnabel did an excellent job with the book; while his interpretation of the text was loose in places, he managed to capture in images the style of Arenas' writing. In other words, if you saw the movie before reading the book, you're going to be somewhat surprised. Some of Schnabel's more memorable scenes are mentioned in passing (if at all) in the book, and one of the film's central sequences, the balloon escape, gets one sentence. Where Arenas and Schnabel intersect is in the lushness, the ability to find celebration and remarkable beauty inside the ugliness of the Castro regime (and, for a few years' worth, the Batista regime before it). Arenas' memoir is also likely to shock more than a few in its sexual explicitness (another aspect Schnabel rather shied away from, which I found a tad surprising while reading the book), but so be it. There is nothing gratuitous about either Arenas' promiscuity or his literary descriptions of it; it's no different than using the language of excess to describe the beastliness of a life that involves hand-to-mouth poverty and political censure. And throughout, more than anything (and perhaps this is what makes the book so powerful), *Before Night Falls* is a celebration, both of

Arenas' life and the lives of many other Cuban writers persecuted as dissidents in the latter half of the twentieth century. \*\*\*\* 1/2

This book shocked me, comforted me, saddened me and, at the end, disappointed me. After he spends so much of the book covering this misfortune in Cuba, I felt depressed by the way the book ends (and in the city I live in, no less!). Definitely an honest, unadulterated account of one author who lived through many things in his life. I highly recommend reading it.

Beautiful, moving story of one Cuban writer's adversities! A must read or at the bare minimum see the movie with Javier Bardem, who gives a powerful performances.

I had checked this book out from the library a few years ago. I wanted to read it again and with rereads I always buy them as if they are that good you should own it.

Loved the movie and my recent trip to Havana made we want to read the source material. Glad to find it a a fair price and quick delivery.

I found it too hard to get into this book. The subject matter is of interest but the writing style kept putting me to sleep.

After seeing the movie, I was interested in reading the book to get a feel for the writers voice. I'm so glad I did. Written in almost a stream of consciousness, Arenas's telling of a gay writers life under Fidel Castro is far more harrowing that could be depicted on screen. But it's also such a testament to the human spirit, and the quest to break the confines of imprisonment physically as well as artistically and sexually. He relays his story with an unapologetic frankness in regards to his various sexual exploits as well as his bitterness towards Castro. I'm amazed that people manage to survive against so much adversity. After his suicide, we as readers are fortunate there's a body of work that exists, and after reading this biography, the books should be considered all the more precious for the risks it took to get them published.

Before Night Falls is the most provocative book I've read in a while. I bought it after seeing the movie, and had to learn more about Reinaldo Arenas. I'd like to read more of his work.

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