

Sergio De La Pava
Personae: A Novel

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Sergio De La Pava is not a writer and he does not live in Brooklyn. Sergio De La Pava is a public defender, who lives in Queens, who juggles 70-80 cases at a time, while also (somehow) finding time to write. He wrote his first novel, *A Naked Singularity*, in dead moments on the train and during little lulls before court. Within the book's diegesis, De La Pava explores physical necessity, philosophy, judicial injustices, structural inequality, and existential despair, all within the confines of the stiflingly inert American justice system—he went with his pen to the places and potentialities prohibited by his day job.

After completing *A Naked Singularity*, a herculean feat given the book's length (678 pages), it took him nearly a decade to get it published; in fact, he had given up on the whole enterprise, until his wife cajoled him into spending about 2,000 dollars required to self-publish the book, which was then a pretty novel (and, some thought, dull-witted) idea. At the pace of a star's inevitable collapse, editors, readers, authors, and publishers began taking notice of this big book; this notice transmuted into a book deal with The University of Chicago Press, not to mention accolades that would place his name in the same sentence as some of this moment's greats, such as George Saunders and Eimear McBride, to name two. De La Pava's book won the PEN/Robert W. Bingham Prize, for the best debut novel of 2012.

Rather than allowing his first book's success to stifle his aesthetic output (a la David Foster Wallace), De La Pava's book, *Personae*, hit the presses with alacrity, only a year later. This book, also placed within the oft-misunderstood world of legal bureaucracy, begins in a dead centenarian's apartment, as understood from inside the head of an atypically committed and gifted homicide police—Helen Tame. She reads the blood and the necrosis, the stink and the apartment's dis-arrangement, in an attempt to reverse-engineer a narrative that could give justice to a life, if not bring a killer to justice.

Her victim, Antonio Arce, left much more than bone behind—in fact, he left a whole body of work; after finding a box full of incipient and complete manuscripts, signed by the decedent, Tame embarks upon an epistemologist's journey, but probably not a detective's, one that takes her into the absurdist world

of a Sartre-ish crazy-ward; a deep, Colombian jungle, filled with *Stranger*-esque heat, during *La Violencia*; pre-revolution Cuba, where capitalism's killed; and, finally, the streets of NYC, where Cuban sandwiches are invented and perfect espresso shots are pulled for imperfectly perfect ladies.

At times, these nested narratives seem over-indulgent and unnecessarily erudite, but De La Pava's wit, his compassion, and his undeniable desire to ink these characters into humanity keep the reader reading and the narrative chaos within a reasonable gravitational field; at the moment when one of these earth rocks seems to slip out of orbit, the math of it all ends up working out, the errata settles.

De La Pava's adroit prose quietly move the reader from the incomprehensibly big (war, historical objectivity, omniscient deities) to the comparatively small but still difficult to fully grasp (the old dying man's possible murder, the restaurant's monotony, the stranger's gate). The tension between these two frameworks—the transcendent and the quotidian—comes to an apogee through a pseudo-fictional account of an apolitical Colombian denizen, who desires only to restore some semblance of order to his artificially-Manichean world, by liberating a woman and child taken by the rebel forces in the middle of liturgy. This Stallone-like hero would seem utterly and completely sardonic, traipsing through the thickets on a revenge-quest, if it were not for his continuous internal dialogue with a dog-shaped deity over evil's nature and origins, and his perpetual recognition of the permeable and flexible boundaries between self and world.

De La Pava, never an either/or writer, folds into his character's philosophical murmurings the topical and immediate, as well. The FARC's presence in present-day Colombia parallels in shape and form the nameless, god-less rebel group in the novel. De La Pava's rhetorical choice to create a symbolic, fictional figure to stand in for the real Colombian heads and bodies being dismantled at this very moment, by aimless and boundless bullets and blades, reveals yet again that Sergio De La Pava is not *just* a writer, but a lawyer, a historian, a philosopher, a father, a Colombian-American.