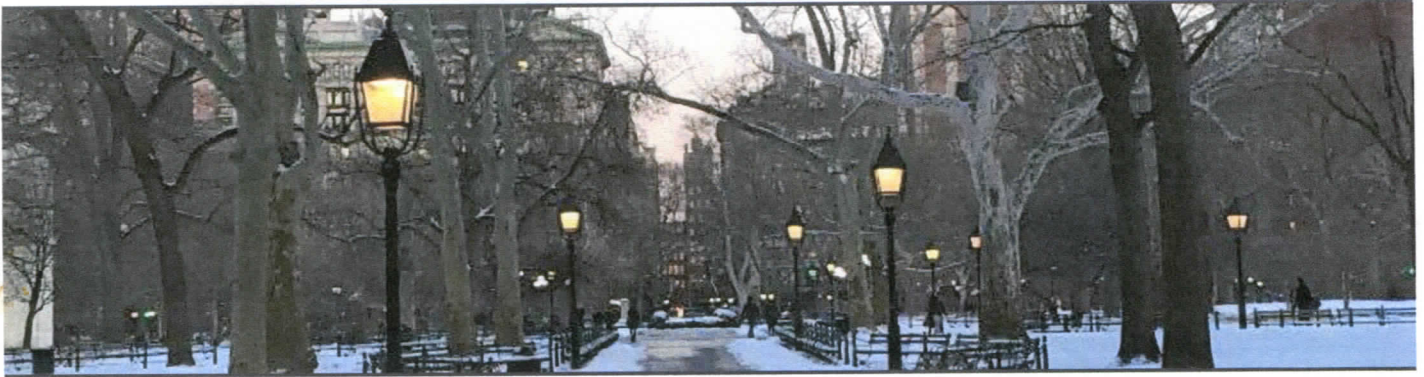


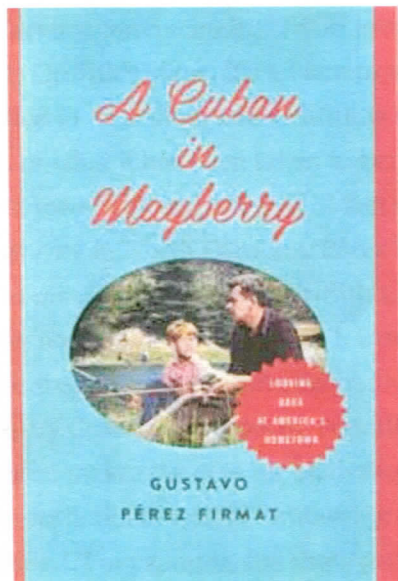
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"The Andy Griffith Show" Receives Scholarly Attention

Pérez Firmat's *A Cuban in Mayberry* creatively combines memoir with the intense study of a single television show.



Gustavo Pérez Firmat, *A Cuban in Mayberry: Looking Back at America's Hometown*, University of Texas Press, 2014, 194 pp.

Living as an exile in America in the forties, Theodor Adorno wrote: "Every

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intellectual in emigration is, without exception, mutilated and does well to acknowledge it to himself...He lives in an environment that must remain incomprehensible to him...he is always astray" (*Minima Moralia*, 33). Cuban exile, and Professor of Literature at Columbia University, Gustavo Pérez Firmat echoes something of this sentiment in his book *A Cuban in Mayberry*, as he describes how the émigré suffers a "strictly irreplaceable" loss of "intimacy between person and place" (12). Attempting to comprehend the 'incomprehensible,' Adorno turned his sharp, critical eye on American popular culture which infamously did not fair well. It fairs far better under Pérez Firmat's analytical gaze. Pérez Firmat posits that the analysis of U.S. pop culture goes some way to alleviating his feeling of displacement. Indeed, he takes refuge in the complex, fictional TV town of Mayberry where its residents – the characters of *The Andy Griffith Show* (*TAGS*) – "have never lost their place" (10). Pérez Firmat states: "watching *TAGS*, I developed a sense of what it must be like to enjoy such intimacy, to feel rooted in the ground under your feet and to know that you live among people who are similarly rooted"(11). Creatively combining memoir with the intense study of a single television show, Pérez Firmat's book astutely and gracefully analyzes how *TAGS*, one of the most popular sitcoms in U.S. television history, has managed to turn "millions of Americans and at least one Cuban into Mayberrians" (15). Needless to write, Adorno with his justified suspicion of such cultural hegemony would have hated *TAGS*.

In his introduction Pérez Firmat makes two bold assertions. Firstly, referencing the degree of control Andy Griffith exercised over the show's content, Pérez Firmat argues convincingly: "*TAGS* is not only *The Andy Griffith Show* but Andy Griffith's show. It's an auteur sitcom, to use a concept not often applied to television, and Griffith is the auteur...His vision made *TAGS* what it is, or what it has been taken to be: an iconic portrayal of life in a small Southern town" (9). Mayberry is in fact a stand in for Griffith's own hometown, Mount Airy in North Carolina. Pérez Firmat continues throughout the book to provide examples of Griffith's authorship by citing the sitcom's production notes and quoting Griffith from interviews conducted between the sixties to the eighties. Secondly, employing Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset's precepts on twentieth-century aesthetic movements, Pérez Firmat makes the case for analyzing *TAGS* as one would a classical novel because its fictional world contains the key novelistic elements Ortega identified. For example, the show presents far more details about the world than the viewer can recall: "No sitcom of the 1960s makes a point of giving such human and physical density to its setting" (25); and "access to the world of the characters seems unmediated" (15). Additionally, *TAGS* behaves like a novel through its slowness that "subordinates events to

■ Virginia Van Upp

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experience" thus providing "an abiding sense of what it's like to live in Mayberry" (15). Pérez Firmat's approach to Mayberry is to treat it as a novelistic world.

Unusually structured, *A Cuban in Mayberry* is split into two parts; this organization as Pérez Firmat explains, is governed by his interest in and exploration of the "show as a mitigation of exile" (12). The first part, divided over five chapters, describes Mayberry, the place: its geography, history, and the general atmosphere that go into making Mayberrians Mayberrian. The second part of the book entitled, "The People" contains twelve chapters, each one presenting short character studies of the town's inhabitants. While these careful portraits can focus on some of the show's key characters, such as Andy, his son Opie, and Aunt Bee, lesser-known residents of Mayberry receive equal treatment, and include: Ernest T. Bass, Mr. Schwump, and Thelma Lou. One of the most illuminating character portraits describes Andy Taylor's difficult relationship to female characters, which Griffith in interviews linked to his own problems with women and Pérez Firmat considers vital to the show's endurance in so far as it spoke to the post-war crisis of masculinity. The book also includes an Appendix that provides a complete list of episodes for all eight seasons of *TAGS* alongside their original airdates. Between part one and part two of the work the author provides an interlude that addresses his own personal engagement with the show. The epilogue is also an attempt to confront some of the complexities of the author's fandom problematized by his observations of the show's more challenging features. As Pérez Firmat explains "The charm, simplicity, and sunny disposition of Mayberrians make it easy to overlook the occasional darkness of *TAGS*. Mayberry is a paradise, but an anxious one, Arcadia under siege" (6).

An informative and engaging chapter from the first part of the book entitled "Against Change" addresses something of Mayberry's darkness while examining the town's response to out-of-towners. Pérez Firmat identifies how the show's episodes may take either a domestic or exotic plot format. Domestic plots result from a misunderstanding, or discordance between the town's inhabitants. Exotic episodes however "revolve around intruders. This category includes the city slickers, hobos, crooks, con artists, and convicts who come upon Mayberry" (38). In these episodes that go to make up a third of the show's corpus, most "begin with the arrival of a newcomer and end with a scene not of community enhancement by inclusion but of community restoration by exclusion" (39). Pérez Firmat locates these exclusions as rooted in the town's resistance to change. For this reason, he observes, places of passage, such as the freight yard, bus stops and roads become sites of anxiety that threaten the town's way of life. In exotic

episodes following a stranger's disruption of the status quo and then necessary exit, Mayberry restores order and nothing in the town has changed, barring character knowledge (unlike other sitcoms *TAGS* characters remember incidents from previous episodes and will refer to them). Utilizing his encyclopedic knowledge of *TAGS* Pérez Firmat vividly describes multiple examples of episodes that follow this format. As the author explicates: "the town's phobias— fear of change, fear of outsiders—are the necessary complement to the town's philia" (46). The communities' philia, which Pérez Firmat explores in the previous chapter, refers to the non-erotic love Mayberrian's share for one another and that subordinates kin for kith. It's what leads Pérez Firmat to coin *TAGS* as a "comcom" (community comedy), as opposed to a rubecom as it is sometimes derisively termed. Pérez Firmat explains: "Mayberry is an exclusive club, a closed society...not only because it draws the viewer in (we're also part of the club), but also because it keeps strangers out" (32). Here Pérez Firmat recognizes the paradox to his finding *TAGS* the antidote to his own displacement, stating: "I belong to a club that may not welcome me as a member. Mayberrian soil—red clay— is not receptive to transplants" (12).

Despite *A Cuban in Mayberry's* compartmentalized organization it does not resemble a guide or reference book to the sitcom as other television literature often seeks to provide. This original book sits somewhere between memoir, critical analysis, and fan studies. Pérez Firmat exerts his literary background not only in his analysis, but also in his comparisons to works by authors ranging from Flannery O'Connor to Robert Penn Warren and Aristotle to Aldous Huxley. While his analogy between the classical novel and a television series is far from original, it challenges arguments that tend to hail shows of recent years such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, and *Breaking Bad* as the innovators of this novelistic form. One might argue it's the innovations in technology (Video and DVD boxsets, VOD, YouTube and Netflix) that lend entire television seasons to the same close and far readings that novels permit. Pérez Firmat notes that he watched the 249 episodes of *TAGS* on his computer in order to write his study that registers repetitions, continuities and tensions in a similar way to literary analysis. With *A Cuban in Mayberry* Pérez Firmat demonstrates that an older television show previously dismissed by critics holds up to the same critical scrutiny reserved for classical novels and today's long form television shows.

Charmingly written in accessible prose, *A Cuban in Mayberry* is intended to reach a wider audience than *TAGS* fans and television scholars. By the end of the last chapter Pérez Firmat has truly earned the head turning, and endearing epilogue that I leave for the reader to discover.