

Review: Exploring a garden of earthy delights New York barrio sets the scene for ribald, exuberant novel

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By TONY BECKWITH / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Edgardo Vega Yunque wants everyone to understand his Nuyorican world, and those who read his work will certainly begin to do so. In his previous book, which had an even longer title, he championed the cause of those living on the lower rungs of society's ladder. *Omaha Bigelow* is another no-holds-barred trip through the streets and over the rooftops of New York's Lower East Side, an earthy, entertaining story involving a colorful cast of characters and a succession of highly improbable situations.

Maruquita, a saucy little sorceress, is only 15 but already skilled in the traditional Puerto Rican art of witchcraft. She is also an unabashed natural when it comes to sex, which it does when she meets the book's main character, the one she calls Omagaw Boogaloo. Sex, graphically and exuberantly described, is a major ingredient in this story that recognizes no taboos. Maruquita, whose own mother describes her as "the worst stereotype of a Puerto Rican homegirl," speaks in mangled Spanglish laced with urban African-American riffs and rhythms. Mr. Vega Yunque is brilliant at reproducing her foul-mouthed barrio patois, then contrasting it with the articulate purring of the aristocratic but equally libidinous Winnifred, the other woman in this convoluted lovers' triangle.

The hero of the piece suffers from "penile aparaguitis," a condition/plot device that permits the author, who is obviously enjoying himself, to pile up the metaphors in his amusing assessment of relations between the United States and Puerto Rico. With his tongue in his cheek, among other places, he wryly observes that "it's not the size that counts." He admits to loving the United States as well as its Caribbean colony but speculates that "Americans can learn geography only by bombing places."

Mr. Vega Yunque sometimes steps out from behind the scenes and onto his soapbox to bring his case directly to the reader, and while this can be an effective technique, he occasionally appears to be protesting a little too much. He frequently returns to the theme of "formula authors who create vapid, mildly entertaining novels which likely contribute to the dumbing down of this country."

It is evident from his body of work that this writer has plenty to say on all sorts of subjects. As he himself admits, he cheerfully raises "the digression" to an art form. He tells us he "writes to awaken," and calls this book both a literary novel

and a political one. Behind his ribald humor, he rails against a "society that is color-blind because citizens, black or white, are inconsequential at a certain level." Mr. Vega Yunque shines a bright light on subjects that aren't explored nearly enough in the mainstream media, and offers his readers a vicarious walk on the wild side while he's at it.

Tony Beckwith is a writer and translator living in Austin.

The Lamentable Journey of Omaha Bigelow into the Impenetrable Loisaída Jungle

Edgardo Vega Yunque (The Overlook Press, \$24.95)