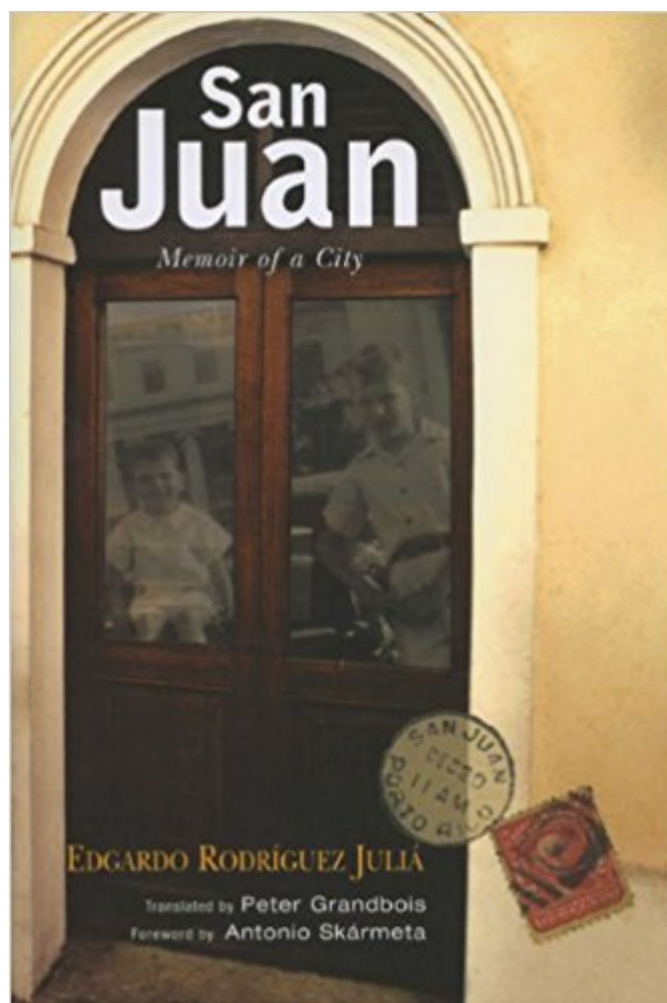


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San Juan: Memoir Of A City (THE AMERICAS)



Synopsis

San Juan: Memoir of a City conducts readers through Puerto Rico's capital, guided by one of its most graceful and reflective writers, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá. No mere sightseeing tour, this is culture through immersion, a circuit of San Juan's historical and intellectual vistas as well as its architecture. In the allusive cityscape he recreates, Rodríguez Juliá invokes the ghosts of his childhood, of San Juan's elder literati, and of characters from his own novels. On the most tangible level, the city is a place of cabarets and cockfighting clubs, flaneurs and beach bums, smoke-filled bars and honking automobiles. Poised between a colonial past and a commercial future, the San Juan he portrays feels at times perilously close to the pitfalls of modernization. Tenement houses and fading mansions yield to strip malls and Tastee Freezes; asphalt hems in jacarandas and palm trees. In Puerto Rico, he muses, life is not simply cruel, it is also busy erasing our tracks. Juliá resists that erasure, thoughtfully etching a palimpsest that preserves images of the city where he grew up and rejoicing in the one where he still lives.

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Customer Reviews

"To read "San Juan: Memoir of a City" is to trace and retrace the contours of a lived space, of neighborhoods populated by fascinating real and imaginary characters, of a centuries-old history radically transformed in the last sixty to seventy years." --Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, University of Michigan
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• "An elegant pirouette through civic as well as personal history.

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• "Detailed with a vibrant nostalgia This book is filled with insights into the dramatic changes he experienced as Puerto Rico moved from an agrarian society to an industrialized modern economy.

• "Gustavo A. Mellander, "Hispanic Outlook"

Edgardo Rodriguez Julia teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Puerto Rico. Among his many books are *La renuncia del heroe Baltasar* (1974, translated into English in 1997 as *The Renunciation*), *El entierro de Cortijo* (1983, published in a bilingual edition in 2004 as *Cortijo's Wake*), *La noche oscura del Nino Aviles* (1984), and *Sol de medianoche* (1999). Peter Grandbois is assistant professor of English at California State University, Sacramento.

When many people think of San Juan, Puerto Rico, they think of an old quaint colonial Spanish city. It was founded in 1521 and quickly established itself as an important fortress town. Its location was so strategic that many European countries tried to wrest her away from the Spanish. Thus, San Juan was attacked by the British buccaneer Francis Drake in 1595 and later in 1598, he failed both times. Later the Dutch tried to conquer San Juan in 1625 with the same result. The British had not given up. In 1797 determined to secure the island fortress they amassed a fleet of 64 warships and 7,000 troops. They failed. The seven blocks of the walled city with strategically placed fortifications seemed impregnable. It remained so until 1898 when Puerto Rico was conquered by the United States. Since then innumerable tourists from all over the world have launched their individual and unique invasion. Today, Old San Juan is a pleasant compact city, rich in history and local color and easy to explore on foot in a few hours. Its Spanish colonial charm remains and many unique features amaze visitors every year. But San Juan is more than el Casco of Old San Juan. The entire city is much larger. Old San Juan is but a small portion of a large bustling, crowded modern metropolis. Other sectors of the city include among others metropolitan Santurce, touristy and expensive El Condado, vibrant Hato Rey which harbors the island's financial centers and Rio

Piedras holding on to its ever active marketplace as well as hosting the respected University of Puerto Rico, founded in 1903. San Juan is also a place where hundreds of thousands of people live every day lives. Author Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá has been among them. This book is a tale of his memories and adventures in several San Juan neighborhoods. They include trips with his father to various parts of San Juan, to baseball games and later his introduction to the city's exuberant night life. They are detailed with an earthy vibrant nostalgia. Born in the countryside, his family moved to San Juan when he was only 11 years old. This book is filled with insights about the dramatic changes he experienced as Puerto Rico moved from an agrarian society to an industrialized modern economy. His grandfather had been an architect and passed on his sense of order and beauty which influenced his grandson's carefully honed vision. His observations of the city's architecture enlivens this tale. Rodríguez Juliá, a respected writer and long term university professor of literature and creative writing, was recently lauded by the legendary Rosario Ferré as an outstanding Puerto Rican free thinker in the tradition of Voltaire. An author of several novels, some of which he refers to in this book, he chronicles how San Juan has changed in this book. Sometimes for the better, many times not. He saw beautiful mansions deteriorate and magnificent tree-lined avenues disappear, replaced by Tastee Freeze joints, hamburger stands and strip malls. The old, the traditional was wiped away before his sensitive young eyes with a certainty and rapidity that saddened him. As he poignantly reflects, "In Puerto Rico life is not simply cruel, it is also busy erasing our tracks." His university student days were particularly interesting. As a college freshman in 1964, he was a thirsty budding intellectual entering manhood during the turmoil that represented Puerto Rican society at that time. It provided him fodder for his literary talents. Self described as "a son of urban disorder, of the dispossessed and the marginalized, of an urbanized and declassed middle class, a frequenter of roadside bars and the sarcasm of whores disguised as waitresses" he looked forward, unlike many college students, to the intellectual vitality of a university. When he arrived he felt he had "been transported to a magic place, a utopia. It was an initiation into a city of letters within a city of ignorance." There was much to contemplate beyond his studies. The Cuban Revolution, Fidel and Che, Viet Nam, the Civil Rights movement, the rapid urbanization of Puerto Rico and the attendant destruction of the old provided a cauldron for his intellectual ferment. There was a reaction to the heavy European and American influence that had permeated higher education on the island for decades. A desire to create their home grown reality grew. He was not alone, university students were mobilized and empowered as they had not been in decades, if ever. Beyond the university, Puerto Rican politics was changing quickly. The legendary Luis Muñoz Rivera, a leader since the 1930s retired in 1964 after sixteen years as governor. Chaos within his party

followed. In 1968, they would lose the Mayor's office in San Juan and the Governorship to the pro-statehood party for the first time ever. Heady times for sure which provided this budding intellectual enduring themes that have been reflected in his lifetime of thinking and writing. *****Gustavo A. Mellander, Ph.D., was Dean of Academic Affairs at Inter American University in Puerto Rico in the late 1960s. Later he was a college president for twenty years and an academic dean at several universities. Most recently he was a Graduate School Dean at George Mason University. He has written several books on Panama and U.S. history.

Able translated into English by Peter Grandbois (Assistant professor of English at California State University, Sacramento) and provided with an informative Foreword by Antonio Skarmeta, "San Juan: Memoir Of A City" by Edgardo Rodriguez Julia is a combination travel guide and memoir of Puerto Rico's capital city. More than just a guidebook for tourists, "San Juan" presents a personalized perspective on the city's history and culture by a gifted author who has created a unique work of literary merit as he describes everything the city has to offer from cockfighting clubs and smoke-filled bars, to cabarets and street traffic. The reader is vividly introduced to a living city conflicted with its colonial past juxtaposed with aspirations for a 'commercial future'. Also available in a hardcover edition (9780299203702, \$45.00), "San Juan" is rewarding and highly recommended reading for anyone with an interest in this fascinating, complex, colorful, and sometimes contradictory city.

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