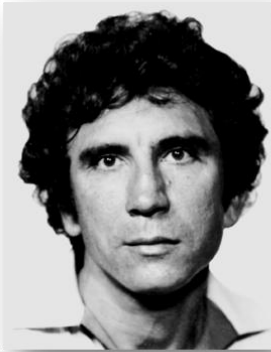


# REINALDO ARENAS

## Cuban Author and Political Dissident (1854-1900)



Born into rural poverty in Cuba, in 1959 he became an early supporter of the revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power. But Arenas became increasingly disenchanted with the revolution's homophobic rhetoric and policies. Moving to Havana in 1963, he worked as a researcher and later as editor and journalist for the literary magazine *La Gaceta de Cuba*. His first novel *Celestino antes del alba* (1967) (*Singing from the Well*) was his only book published in Cuba. When open persecution of homosexuals began, in the 1960s and 1970s, he rejected the revolution. As his writings grew increasingly critical he was no longer allowed to publish on the island. His second and best-known novel, *El mundo alucinante* (1969) (*Hallucinations*), was smuggled out of the country and published abroad. During the mid-1970s Arenas spent three years in prison for his writings and public, open homosexuality. Coming to the U.S. as part of the Mariel boatlift, he eventually settled in New York. By 1980 he began to write furiously, first publishing the novella *Old Rosa*. The novel *Farewell to the Sea* – a manuscript once confiscated by the Cuban government – followed in 1982. The heterogeneous collection of poetry, essays and letters *Necesidad de libertad* (1986), was followed by the novels *Graveyard of the Angels* (1987) and *The Doorman* (1988). Suffering from AIDS and too sick to continue writing, Arenas committed suicide in 1990. In a farewell letter to the Miami newspaper *Diario las Américas* he wrote, "My message is not a message of failure, but rather one of struggle and hope. Cuba will be free. I already am." By the time of his death this passionate writer turned activist had completed nine novels, an autobiography, scores of poems, plays, and short stories, and dozens of political and literary essays. Among his posthumously published works were *Journey to Havana* (1990) and the autobiography *Before Night Falls* (1992) which was made into an Academy-Award nominated film in 2000.

### Lesson Plan

#### Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate prior experience: Have you heard of Reinaldo Arenas, the activist and novelist who escaped from Cuba during the 1980's? Read the biographical information.
2. Group Discussion: Describe how his zest for freedom of expression inspired his writings.
3. Gather lasting contributions from his New York Times obituary found at <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/09/obituaries/reinaldo-arenas-47-writer-who-fled-cuba-dies.html>

#### Level 2: Additive Approach

1. Listen to Reinaldo Arenas describe his early beginnings as he reads from his autobiography, *Before Night Falls*, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTGFVhiWwHI&feature=fvwrel>
2. Website Investigation: Connect Arenas' humble beginnings, life, and activism to other Hispanic or Latino inductees through the following link: <http://www.legacyprojectchicago.org/HispLatinoa.html>

#### Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. Analyze how Arenas' personal experiences with censorship, persecution, and sexual orientation provided the important context for "queer activism."
2. Read the research from Rafael Ocasio's analysis of Renaldo Arenas' politics in [http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/bildn/publications/documents/Ocasio31\\_000.pdf](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/dept/bildn/publications/documents/Ocasio31_000.pdf)
3. Examine the stages or events which were pivotal in building his strong personality and dedication to justice in his writings and life.

#### Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Despite literary acclaim, disgrace, prison, exile, and terminal illness, what was the impact of Arenas' life and work?
2. In what policy or cause would you recommend for that would depict the passion that Arenas exhibited in his lifetime?