

Before Vieques became a *cause celebre* for many, there was Usmaíl

By **ROBERT FRIEDMAN**

friedmanr@shns.com
STAR Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON

Before Vieques became a *cause celebre* for Al Sharpton, Edward James Olmos, Bobby Kennedy Jr., et al, there was Nana Luisa and there was Chefa Laugier and, above all, there was Usmaíl.

Sharpton, Olmos and Kennedy were the most noted celebrity-protagonists in the demonstrations of the past few years against the Navy there. They received ample coverage in the national media for their protests before the Navy packed up and moved its war games onto computer screens in other parts of the free world.

Nana Luisa, Chefa and Usmaíl — not to mention Narcisa Lomena and Quico el Morrocoyo — are the principal fictional characters who give a literary dimension to the plight of the *viequenses* in their contact with

the *americanos* in the 1930s, '40s and '50s.

The novel is "Usmaíl" by the late Puerto Rican author Pedro Juan Soto, who was way ahead of the curve about the troubles in Vieques when the novel was published in 1959.

Now, for the first time, "Usmaíl" is appearing in an English-language translation, thanks to long-time Vieques residents Charlie Connelly and Myrna Pagán, who have done a fine service in making what is considered a Puerto Rican literary classic available to a potentially wider audience of English readers. The book is being published by Sombrero Publishing Company in St. John of the neighboring U.S. Virgin Islands.

For the unaware, the novel portrays the miserable conditions lived daily by the grownups on *La Isla Nena* during the Depression and continuing into the Operation Bootstrap years, when the big island of Puerto Rico was experiencing a mini-economic boom while the little island some 10 miles off the southeast coast

was undergoing a maxi-sonic boom of Navy guns.

The residents, then as most recently, were conflicted about the U.S. military presence on the island. Soto writes: "On the one hand, those who were not willing to give up the land to the *americanos*, on the other, those who were willing to give up the whole island for democracy. Looked at from this point of view the intention of the Government was admirable, to uphold such beautiful ideals for the human race; although apparently the residents of Vieques were not part of the human race, because such ideals were put aside to impose that plan."

Iraq, anyone?

The Americans portrayed in the novel are one-dimensional, just as the *viequenses* appear to have been seen in real life when they were sent packing so that two-thirds of the island could be taken over for war maneuvers.

'The colony of a colony'

Usmaíl is the ironically poignant name given to the boy born to a poor black woman living on "the colony of a colony." The boy was fathered by a certain Mr. Adams, the U.S. government official sent by Washington to dole out surplus food, clothes and a job or two to the close-to starving natives. (There is a very funny scene in which two island women try to figure out what, exactly, those surplus dried fish scales in the can bearing the name Quaker Oats are good for.) Mr. Adams lusts for and conquers the beautiful black woman. But as soon as he finds out that the roll-in-the-back-seat of his chugging Ford results in her becoming pregnant, he heads for Splitsville.

Chefa Laugier is sure her lover will come back to her one day, and she haunts the Post Office waiting for a letter from him. She waits and she waits and becomes a ghostly figure in the Post Office doorway. When she gives birth she names her son after the printing on the mail containers she sees while waiting with hope against hope for her gringo savior who, needless to say, neither writes nor appears in person.

Chefa dies soon after childbirth and Usmaíl is brought up by Nana Luisa, who is a wonderful character. She's kind and wise and people come to her for food

USMAÍL

By Pedro Juan Soto



PHOTO COURTESY TO THE STAR

The novel "Usmaíl," by the late Puerto Rican author Pedro Juan Soto, was way ahead of the curve about the troubles in Vieques when the novel was published in 1959.

and medical treatment and spiritualist advice. Although Nana Luisa deeply and truly believes in *nada*, she doesn't let any of the faithful go away hungry. She clearly sees humanity for all the bad — and good — it is capable of.

"She put the disaster down to Cebute. What else could she say aloud if everybody preferred to believe in malignant spirits? She had no choice but to invent a particular mythology to discharge the blame that Man was not ready to recognize as his own, the execution of glorious action that he did not believe worthy of his own potential and wished to call miracles."

Usmaíl, keenly aware of being a mulatto, of possessing what he considers a ridiculous name and of trying to exist in an overtaken homeland, grows up mostly bitter. His bitterness leads to his downfall, which seems sad rather than tragic because, for this reader at least, there's a certain coldness at the center of his overheated heart.

Is it nature or colonialist nurture that made Usmaíl that way? Could be both. Who knows? Maybe that's what Pedro Juan Soto wanted us to figure out.



Is it nature or colonialist nurture that made Usmaíl that way? Could be both. Who knows? Maybe that's what Pedro Juan Soto wanted us to figure out.