

Something's Not Right

Dog poisonings are only a symptom of a deeper sickness in a place where everything's supposed to be perfect.

By **PATRICIA T. O'CONNOR**

LEAFY, PROSPEROUS LITTLEFIELD sounds too good to be true. An idyllic Boston suburb, it ranks No. 6 on The Wall Street Journal's list of the 20 Best Places to Live in America. Band concerts, well-tended Victorian houses, enlightened citizens — what could go wrong?

Cue ominous music. In the world of fiction, as we all know, a charmed setting is a catastrophe waiting to happen. And with a novelist like Suzanne Berne in charge, we aren't disappointed.

As "The Dogs of Littlefield" begins, a crack has already appeared in this civilized veneer. A proposal to let dogs run off-leash during certain hours in the park has divided the town. Rude notices are posted, then threatening ones. Now dogs are dropping dead one by one, poisoned. On the surface, Littlefield should be able

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to cope. After all, it's home to 1 percent of the nation's psychotherapists. Even one of the poisoning victims is "a registered therapy dog" (a brilliant touch, and typical of Berne's sly humor).

But the town isn't coping. The dog poisonings are only a symptom of a deeper sickness — a vague unease, a sense that

THE DOGS OF LITTLEFIELD

By **Suzanne Berne**

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all is not right in a place where everything's supposed to be perfect. People start looking over their shoulders; "Something's going down," "Something's up." Even the children are jittery, fearing that things are "out of balance in the universe." Paranoia spreads like the flu.

At the center of Berne's novel is a troubled marriage. Margaret and Bill Downing have every reason to be happy, but aren't. Now their struggle to stay together is wearing them out. Bill, an investment planner, thinks, "Something is wrong with me," and imagines drowning himself in the Charles River. Margaret

is "apprehensive, fretful," troubled by a "persistent, boring dread." She and Bill tiptoe politely around each other between sessions with a couples counselor. Up in her room, their seventh-grade daughter, Julia, practices her oboe and secretly worries: "It was drawing closer, some sort of disaster."



BRANDON CELI

Amid all this, a Greek chorus appears in the form of a visiting sociocultural anthropologist from the University of Chicago. Dr. Clarice Watkins has long studied the turbulent lives of the dispossessed in poor urban neighborhoods, but now she has

had a brainstorm: Why not focus on the good life, on stability, for a change? So Clarice rents a carriage house from an unsuspecting Littlefield couple (both psychoanalysts) and blends in, eavesdropping and taking notes at coffee shops, parties, soccer matches and town meetings. Before long she too starts to feel uneasy, "as if a small, sharp-clawed animal were scratching at her breastbone." Why aren't these people happier? she wonders.

NOTHING SUCKS a reader in like psychological menace, and Berne is a master of the craft. Her previous novels, "A Crime in the Neighborhood," "A Perfect Arrangement" and "The Ghost at the Table," were also tense and edgy, set against seemingly perfect backdrops. But her latest novel has something extra — flashes of comedy amid the chaos.

"The Dogs of Littlefield" is so absorbing that I kept forgetting to take notes. Berne is a canny writer. Her scenes are elegantly composed, and even throwaway characters jump off the page. Yes, the catastrophes duly arrive. But those comic touches hint that Littlefield simply needs to get a grip. □

Downward Mobility

Trapped in Spain's recession, this novel's protagonist embodies the effects of his country's corruption.

By **MARA FAYE LETHEM**

"ON THE EDGE" is not a book you want to read in fits and starts. It is an anti-tweet, a brick of dense prose, that 70-year-old uncle who corners you at a holiday party, grabs you by the lapels and demands you

ON THE EDGE

By **Rafael Chirbes**

Translated by Margaret Jull Costa
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hear him out. Your eyes sometimes glaze over, and you occasionally have to wipe a fleck of whitish spit off your face, but once you give yourself over to his story, you find there are plenty of rewards.

Rafael Chirbes is a master of the kind of Spanish literature that shines most brightly in lyrical descriptive passages and powerful metaphors steeped in the lessons of a classical education, and that falters with tone-deaf dialogue and in-

MARA FAYE LETHEM is the translator, most recently, of Toni Sala's "The Boys."

tense self-importance. Like that uncle, the narrator of "On the Edge," Esteban, is much more interested in talking than in listening. Conveniently, he has tossed his cellphone into the marsh. The bar and its repertory-theater Greek chorus of domino players stand in for the town he wishes he had left behind and could merely visit with an anthropologist's curiosity. His tale is an elaborate mosaic that interweaves reflection with vivid memories — both inherited and his own — and a cacophonous medley of voices he is hard-pressed to filter out, which plague him as he works out his grim endgame.

Conceived during the very last days of the Spanish Civil War, Esteban was born in 1940, just before his Republican father went to prison. The wounds from that conflict still smart, yet Esteban was also a bystander to Spain's more optimistic phases. When the book opens in 2010, the nation is in the throes of the hangover that is the recession, which — at his age — Esteban knows he will never see the end of. He took the bait of the boom years and has just lost the family carpentry business built by his grandfather. Esteban's father is so old he is little more than a prop in diapers

against which Esteban's venom-tinged resentments reverberate, though his redemptive maxim — "We don't live off other people's work, but our own" — still rings in his son's ears like a Marxist curse. In the light of Esteban's bankruptcy, the weight of the accusations made against him by the workers he must let go is compounded by the knowledge that his botched attempt at ambition was also a paternal betrayal. Ultimately, father and son are inextricably bound by their pessimism, "the same idea that all men are nothing" but a bag of human waste "tied up in the middle."

Esteban's regrets mirror Spain's: the trickle-down effects of corruption on a small-town carpenter. He rails against his thwarted aspirations and inability to transcend his hometown, Olba, set on a marshy lagoon in the shadows of abandoned construction projects. The marsh is beautiful and polluted; it has been a hunting ground for both animals and resistance fighters, a dump, a graveyard, the primordial sludge whence we all emerged and to which we must return — or in Este-



ban's words: "the sole surviving nucleus of a timeless world that remains both fragile and forceful."

"On the Edge" is the culmination of Chirbes's work, a dizzying survey of the last 90 years of Spanish history, his ninth novel published before his death this past August, and his first to appear in America in more than 20 years. Margaret Jull Costa's incandescent translation carries along Esteban's turbulent torrent, which maintains an extended fever pitch as the various streams of the narrative come together in more of a nadir than a climax. When this book finally releases its grip, you may find your lapels sullied by grubby fingerprints you are in no rush to scrub out. □