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THREE PERCENT REVIEW



Let's not deceive ourselves, man is nothing very special. In fact, there are so many of us that our governments don't know what to do with us at all. Six billion humans on the planet and only six or seven thousand Bengal tigers: tell me—who needs protecting most? Yes, you decide who needs most care. A dying African, Chinaman, or Scotsman or a beautiful tiger killed by a hunter. A tiger with its pelt of matchless colours and its flashing eyes is far more beautiful than a varicose-veined old git like me. What a difference in the way it carries itself. How elegant the one and how clumsy the other. Look how they move. Put them next to each other in a cage in the zoo. The children gather round the old man's cage and laugh as they watch him delousing himself or crouching down to defecate; outside the tiger's cage, though, they open their eyes wide with admiration. The sleight of hand that made man the centre of the universe no longer convinces.

Devastating, desolate, and disquieting, Rafael Chirbes's *On the Edge* (*En la orilla*) ought to rank as one of the decade's finest novels. First published in its original Spanish in 2013, *On the Edge* was awarded both Spain's National Prize for Literature and the Critics Prize the following year. The Spanish novelist (who passed away in August at the age of 66) is the author of nine published novels—with a tenth due out posthumously. While billed as his English language debut, *On the Edge* was actually preceded in translation by *Mimoun*, Chirbes's first novel, published some 22 years ago by Serpent's Tail (and out of print since).

Set in late 2010, following the economic crisis that ravaged the Spanish economy (as well as many others around the world), *On the Edge* offers an unflinching glimpse of a nation despoiled and reeling. An unemployment rate of 20% (and rising), poverty, prostitution, xenophobia, Islamophobia, immigration fears, human trafficking, violence, corruption, and environmental decay are the real-life milieu upon which Chirbes situates his unforgiving tale. Septuagenarian Esteban, tasked with end-of-life care for his terminally ill father and burdened with the stresses of his recently bankrupted carpentry workshop (and impending legal charges resulting therefrom), recounts his life, as well as his myriad failures, disappointments, and betrayals, through an unrelenting series of recollections and dirge-like soliloquies.

Taking life is easy, anyone can do that. They do it every day all over the world. just read the newspaper and you'll see. Even you could do it, take someone's life I mean, obviously, you'd have to improve your aim a little (and then he did smile teasingly, the corners of his lively grey eyes etched with a web of delicate lines). Mankind may have constructed vast buildings, destroyed whole mountains, built canals and bridges, but we've never yet succeeded in opening the eyes of a child who has just died. Sometimes it's the biggest, heaviest things that are easiest to move. Huge stones in the back of a truck, vans laden with heavy metals. and yet everything that's inside you—what you think, what you want—all of which apparently weighs nothing—no strong man can life that onto his shoulder and move it somewhere else. No truck can transport it. Loving someone you despise or don't really care for is a lot harder than flooring him with a punch. Men hit each other out of a sense of powerlessness. They think that by using force they can get what they can't get by using tenderness or intelligence.

With shifting narratives and a chorus of other voices (including those of Esteban's equally-ravished employees, business partners, barmates, and his father's one-time palliative nurse), *On the Edge* teems with fear, frustration, anxiety, and despair. Esteban, challenged (and nearly defeated) not only by the plundering economic state, but also by decades of personal degradation (failed romance, compromised loyalties, allegiances upended, and the legacy of his father's generations' attitudes following the war), is forced to confront perdition—familial, social, financial, physical, emotional, and even spiritual.

BOOK INFORMATION

On the Edge
By Rafael Chirbes
Translated by Margaret Jull Costa
Reviewed by Jeremy Garber
[New Directions](#)
464 pages, paperback
ISBN: 9780811222846
\$18.95

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RECENT REVIEWS



Berlin by Aleš Šteger

Reviewed by Vincent Francone

Randall Jarrell once argued a point that I will now paraphrase and, in doing so, over-simplify: As a culture, we need book criticism, not book reviews. I sort of agree, but let's not get into all of that. Having finished. . .

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The Gun by Fuminori Nakamura

Reviewed by Will Eells

Like any good potboiler worth its salt, Fuminori Nakamura's *The Gun* wastes no time setting up its premise: "Last night, I found a gun. Or you could say I stole it, I'm not really sure. I've never seen something so. . .

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This Place Holds No Fear by Monika Held

Reviewed by Lori Feathers

Heiner Resseck, the protagonist in Monika Held's

Chirbes, perhaps like a detached reporter chronicling horrors and atrocities espied from the front lines, infuses an abundance of feeling into characters and setting—despite each being startlingly paralyzed by an unyielding torpor. With gifted prose and a confident style, Chirbes deftly (re)creates a world teetering on ruin and irreconcilability (however hopeful certain characters remain). Like the fetid, rancid lagoon which figures so prominently into the story, *On the Edge* brilliantly captures the collapse of a system once-thriving and supportive, but left in wreckage resulting from avarice, disregard, and myopia.

Rafael Chirbes, called “the best writer of the twenty-first century in Spain” by the Spanish newspaper *ABC*, tears asunder whatever illusions may have endured after the global economic collapse. Without didacticism or a moralizing tone, Chirbes stands amid the debris and destruction, and, with an unflinching gaze, attests to and confirms the harrowing aftermath wrought in the wake of international recession and crises. A remarkable portrait of one man’s struggle to make sense of an encompassing personal, economic, and social decay, *On the Edge* breathes life into an otherwise asphyxiating scene. Chirbes’s *On the Edge* may lack in redemption (and propelling plot) what it makes up for in cautionary storytelling, but pillaged lives and economies both have never seemed so imaginatively conceived nor richly executed. Even the barrenest of wastelands may lay forlorn and neglected, but, if nothing else, Chirbe’s incomparable novel assures that great art may one day rise from even the most polluted locale.

Of course times have changed, Francisco. Life is constantly changing, it is change. It has no other purpose but to change and to keep changing, the Greeks knew this and I imagine even their ancestors knew it too, you never bathe twice in the same stream, you don’t even bathe the same body, today there’s a pimple that didn’t exist yesterday, nor did this varicose vein which, for long hours, has been making its way to the surface, or this ulcer in my groin or on the sole of my foot, and which my hyperglycemia won’t allow to heal; they are all lying, those utopians who say that this troubled life of avarice and lust will be succeeded by a peaceful world in which we will all be brothers, and where, as in the golden age Don Quijote described, we will, in a spirit of fraternal love, dine on a shared meal of acorns. There is no heavenly peace possible beneath the sheltering sky, only a permanent state of war in which everyone is pitched against everyone and everything against everything. The problem is that with so much change, everything somehow ends up pretty much the same.

tags: [jeremy garber](#), [margaret jull costa](#), [new directions](#), [on the edge](#), [rafael chirbes](#), [spanish literature](#)

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thought-provoking, first novel, *This Place Holds No Fear*, intentionally re-lives his past every hour of every day. His memories are his treasures, more dear than the present or future. What wonderful past eclipses. . .

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The Room by Jonas Karlsson

Reviewed by Peter Biello

If you’ve ever worked in a corporate office, you’ve likely heard the phrase, “Perception is reality.” To Björn, the office worker who narrates Jonas Karlsson’s novel *The Room*, the reality is simple: there’s a door near the bathroom that leads. . .

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Thérèse and Isabelle by Violette Leduc

Reviewed by Kaija Straumanis

I recently listened to [Three Percent Podcast #99](#), which had guest speaker Julia Berner-Tobin from Feminist Press. In addition to the usual amusement of finally hearing both sides of the podcast (normally I just hear parts of Chad’s side. . .

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Rambling Jack by Micheál Ó Conghaile

Reviewed by Vincent Francone

“Rambling Jack—what’s that?”

“A novel. Novella, I guess.”

“Yeah, it looks short. What is it, a hundred pages?”

“Sorta. It’s a dual language book, so really, only about... 50 pages total.”

“50 pages?”

“Including illustrations.”

“And this—what. . .

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