



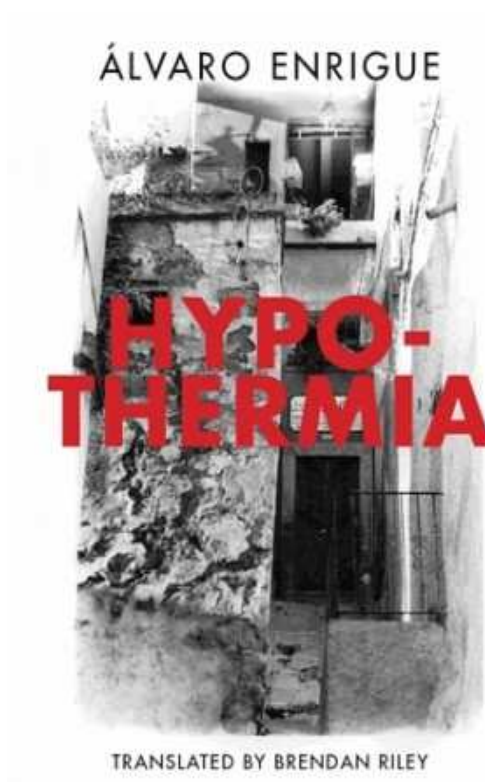
[Book Reviews](#)

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Book Review: *Hypothermia* by Alvaro Enrique

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"To justify my drinking I'll begin some story: nothing literary, just a sad little story, to be followed by others like it. They'll be stories about people who aren't working through difficult questions or pathetic feelings; minor characters—people who've never visited Paris, people nobody cares about. Gringos, for example."

A university professor takes shelter from an apocalyptic hurricane and stumbles into a crazed orgy. An electrician on assignment is interrupted by a disembodied female voice

speaking seductively from the toilet. A rubbish collector transforms his truck into a pirate ship, an astrologer predicts a death that can only be averted through a pet cat, and a Mexican historian turned chef competes on a Swiss reality TV show in a city experiencing a mass suicide crisis. What's not to love?

In these stories and others, Mexican author [Alvaro Enrique](#) leads us on a wild, dizzying romp in *Hypothermia*, his first book translated into English. In this collection of linked short stories and brief vignettes, nothing is ever predictable or straightforward, as stories refuse to follow traditional plots and never end in tidy, clean-cut conclusions. It's as thrilling to encounter writing this good and original as it is terrifying to be confronted with Enrique's grim, unflinching gaze towards 21st-century life and the immigrant experience.

Exile and displacement are arguably the collection's key themes. At times the stories read like a self-help book for survival, or a handbook for (as one character memorably puts it) "how fucked life in the United States really is." Enrique's writing is at its best when it provides one witheringly razor-sharp observation after another about life in "the gringo universe," where "soccer is a sport for little girls," "having children is more a self-indulgent whim than a real decision" and boxes of cereal are as large as suitcases.

Enrique's narrators struggle to cope with their self-imposed exile, which tends to be more out of choice rather than need, and are never able to escape from the fact that although Mexico is no longer home for them, they are never truly American either. At one point a narrator ruefully calls himself "a high class wet-back"; another finds solace in visiting the Washington D.C. zoo, where the animals remind him of himself, "safer and better fed than in the miserable forests where they'd been captured."

One of the most cutting moments of the book occurs when a neighbor bluntly informs the narrator that he is no longer Mexican, now that he has American citizenship: "You're Latino now. Slavery is none of your business and you've got nothing to say about it." Enrique's depiction of the uncertainties and ambiguities that result from always being a foreigner, no matter where you are, is one of the collection's most commendable strengths.

"Descending into the hazy light of Lima and seeing by day how much it resembled Mexico City, I had the dizzy feeling of a Spanish speaker who hears Portuguese for the first time: you feel like you should understand it but something is out of place; it's your language and it's not your language—a parallel reality. I was coming back to a place that seemed like home but just wasn't."

The impossibility of communication is another key theme that appears in these stories. In "White," the narrator watches what might be the defining moment of his life as captured by his video camera, as though he is only able to comprehend its meaning if it's filtered through technology. In "On the Death of the Author," arguably one of the collection's strongest pieces, the narrator struggles with the question of how to tell the story of the last survivor of an extinct indigenous tribe.

“There’s something in the tale,” he says, “—or inside me—that makes it elusive... the whole thing keeps slipping through my fingers like a fistful of marbles.” This appraisal serves as an accurate description of Enrique’s writing itself: the essential meaning of the story is always elusive, but Enrique is talented enough that the thematic links still add up to a comprehensible, undeniably powerful whole, without ever seeming forced or contrived. “*Some stories,*” the narrator says in the aforementioned story, “are impossible to tell,” and the question of how to speak of the unspeakable seems to be one of the primary concerns of Enrique’s fiction.

In summary, if you’re a card-carrying member of the Bolaño or Borges fan club, then you’ll find plenty to savor in this book (as a bonus it even appears in the same font as Bolaño’s own short story collections). Ruthless and thrilling, hilarious and disturbing, this book stares death and the abyss straight in the face and refuses to offer any false comforts—only literature at its bravest and most uncompromising.

“Sometimes writing is a job: obliquely tracing the path of certain ideas that seem indispensable to us, that we have to set down. But other times it’s a question of conceding what remains, accepting the museum and contemplating the balance while awaiting death, asking forgiveness of the sea for whatever was fucked up.”

Hypothermia by Alvaro Enrique was published in May 2013.