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Book World: 'Almost Never' by Daniel Sada

By [Marie Arana](#), Published: May 10

He seemed an unremarkable man, poking through Mexico City's bookstores, his round face notable only for its eternally squinting gaze. He was seen now and then in the literary cafes of La Condesa, where artists hunch over endless rounds of espresso, trading news from imagination's frontiers.



He was squat, thick, stocky. You might have taken him for a steelworker if not for the ink-stained fingers, the satchel over his shoulder, filled to bursting with musty tomes. Yet, for all the shyness, the unexceptional face, the virtual anonymity, Daniel Sada will be remembered in Mexico as a literary titan of his time, one of the most innovative novelists in contemporary Latin American letters. His books stand in startling contrast to the persona: They are a whirling riot of color, a wild cacophony of voices, an extravagant display of pyrotechnical prose. Before his death in November at the age of 58, Sada seemed poised to win every laurel the Spanish-language literary community had to offer. [Roberto Bolano](#) had pronounced him without rival among authors of his generation; [Carlos Fuentes](#) had called him a revelation for the world.

Sada was, without a doubt, a writer's writer. Like [Faulkner](#) or Joyce or [David Foster Wallace](#), he produced rich, dense, diabolically difficult novels — some written in octosyllabic and hendecasyllabic meter, all punctuated with a set of bizarre rules. But the rewards, for anyone in love with the Spanish language, were legion. These were gargantuan masterpieces, clear rejoinders to the stark, minimalist work of Juan Rulfo, whose "Pedro Paramo" had dominated the Mexican literary landscape for more than half a century. They stood in clear contrast, too, to thin, bleak novels by young Mexican writers of the Crack Movement, who fought hard to distance themselves from [Gabriel Garcia Marquez](#) or [Mario Vargas Llosa](#) or Julio Cortazar and then self-destructed in the fray. Just as Sada's weird, culturally incorrect novels began to be noticed — just as Mexico conferred on him its most coveted national prize — a renal malady took him. And so we are left with the Sada we have.

For Spanish-language readers, it is a splendid accumulation. There are short stories in profusion, enough poems to keep scholars scratching their heads for decades and 10 novels — among them the colossal "Because It Seems So False, the Truth Will Never Be Known," a fierce, unforgiving portrait of the chaos and corruption of modern Mexico.

For English-language readers, alas, we have but one volume, and it is this translation of "[Almost Never](#)," a valiant effort by Graywolf Press to offer up Sada's most accessible novel only months after the great man's death.

I say "valiant" because I admire Graywolf's resolve to bring a brilliant Mexican writer to the attention of American readers. I say "effort" because the translation fails spectacularly to deliver anything like Sada's wonderfully wacky prose.

Here, in “Almost Never,” is a bumptious story about sexual obsession that well might appeal to any sentient human being with a few nerve ends and a beating heart. Demetrio, a young agronomist in Oaxaca — it is 1945, in a vibrant metropolis of Mexico — falls in love with a beautiful and inexhaustibly athletic prostitute by the name of Mireya. He is gleefully enjoying her countless charms, visiting her so often that she has no time for other customers, when his mother writes and insists that Demetrio accompany her to a wedding in the desert town of Coahuila. At the wedding, he meets the virginal Renata, whose beauty is so arresting that he cannot help but propose marriage. Although Renata accepts, she is not so easily won. There is to be no touching, she tells him, and certainly no conjugating. Not even a whisper of love, for at least a year. But Demetrio is full of vim and vigor — this is post-World War Mexico, after all, and the country is bursting with possibility. So it’s back to Mireya. And then forth to Renata. And then back, forth, back. You get the picture.

So far: the man-woman thing? It’s a well-worn tale. Hapless hedonist is made to choose between chaste and carnal. All the same, in its Spanish iteration, the story is funny, impish, bawdy, headily reminiscent of Henry Fielding’s “Tom Jones” — and it’s written with a prose that never falters. Demetrio tries mightily, if not heroically, to rid himself of Mireya, even as he labors to meet the imperatives of a harsh fiancée. As we shuttle across the Mexican desert with him, a whole country and people come to life.

In “Almost Never,” in other words, we see a writer in full maturity, a master in control of his craft. No need for polysyllabic meter. No need to gild the goose.

Sad to say, but as accomplished a translator as Katherine Silver can be, her translation is not entirely faithful to the spirit of the sprightly original. Her English version tries too hard. It lumbers through Sada’s verbal gymnastics like a bad dancer, unable to mark the steps. It misses his protean registers. It fidgets in all the funny parts, hesitates in crucial interludes, deploys feeble substitutes for exclamations, interjections, expletives. The bridge we are meant to travel, in other words, falls into a churning sea.

Perhaps Sada would be richly amused to know that his words (so carefully chosen), his scenes (so impeccably rendered) would see the light of day in stitched-up English, a verbal patchwork, a virtual amalgamation. He was, after all, deeply interested in questions of language and had an inexhaustible, finely honed sense of humor.

On the other hand, he would have understood Silver’s dilemma: Alas, playful ingenuity is first to go when passed through the sieve of an alien language.

Have you ever stopped to think how a difficult, truly original work — say Joyce’s “Ulysses,” Faulkner’s “[The Sound and the Fury](#),” Wallace’s “[Infinite Jest](#)” or, even, a simple Declaration of Independence — might struggle to make itself whole in Suriname or Belize?

Well, you might think about Daniel Sada.

Arana is a former editor of Book World and the author of “American Chica,” “Cellophane” and “Lima Nights.”

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