

Down the Rabbit Hole by Juan Pablo Villalobos – review

The devastating, sordid truth is revealed



Nicholas Lezard

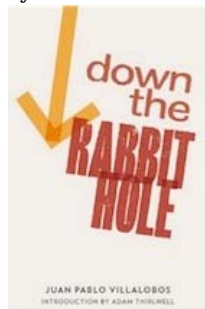
guardian.co.uk, Tuesday 13 September 2011 12.55 BST

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Readers of *Emma Donoghue's Room* may have wondered how her five-year-old narrator fails to understand the word "stable" when applied to a patient's condition, yet is quite capable of transcribing words such as "catatonic". Readers tend to forgive this kind of thing these days – the slipping of authorial control, the fumbling of register. Well, I don't. If you're going to have an imprisoned child narrate a novel, then not so much as a word should be out of place. Otherwise it's like seeing a boom microphone in the frame, or a legionary wearing a wristwatch. (Sometimes, of course, such mistakes are deliberate, but not, I think, in this instance.)

Down the Rabbit Hole

by Juan Pablo Villalobos, translated by Rosalind Harvey



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There are no such slips in Juan Pablo Villalobos's debut novella. We have here a control over the material which is so tight it is almost claustrophobic (and novelists really like constricted spaces). It is just as well it is only 70-odd pages long. I mean that as a compliment.

A story told by the young son of a Mexican drug lord, it, like *Room*, is a study in isolation, and full of the pathos of the child's incomplete understanding. The child, Tochtli (or "rabbit" in Nahautl, Mexico's indigenous language), also has an occasionally precocious vocabulary – but we have a plausible explanation for this: he reads the dictionary before he goes to bed. And so his word-hoard includes, apart from the standard simple signifiers, such oddities as "sordid", "disastrous", "immaculate", "pathetic" and "devastating".

However, like Mrs Stitch's annoying daughter in *Scoop*, who revels in the word "banal" ("it is a new word whose correct use I have only lately learnt"), these are words which he finds apply to nearly everything. His memory is "good, practically devastating"; Mexico is "a disastrous country"; the dish pozole, which can be made with pigs' heads, although tasty, is "sordid" to look at while it's cooking. An endnote tells us that before the Spanish outlawed the custom, pozole could, on special occasions, be made with the flesh from human sacrifices.

And, being the son of a drug lord, he lives a life that is heavily circumscribed – "I know

maybe thirteen or fourteen people" – yet filled with experience of death. "If I counted dead people I'd know more than thirteen or fourteen people. Seventeen or more. Twenty, easily. But dead people don't count, because the dead aren't people, they're corpses." But there are still the common daydreams of childhood, twisted by circumstance. Tochtli has a great fondness for hats, and a great desire to own a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. Bizarrely, yet with equally bizarre believability, he is taken by his father and tutor to Liberia in order to capture one; but seeing as he already has a couple of tigers and a lion in the back garden – remember Al Pacino's *Scarface* and his tiger? – we assent to this quite easily and, besides, the child's world is already oneiric, as you may recall yourself.

It is not, thankfully, a world bereft of humour, although much of it is dark and the laughter has a tendency to die on your lips. The boy's tutor, Mazatzin, "earned millions of pesos by making up adverts for shampoo and fizzy drinks. But Mazatzin was always sad, because he'd actually studied to be a writer. This is where it gets sordid: someone earning millions of pesos being sad because they're not a writer." (I'd be surprised if Villalobos himself didn't have a sordid episode in his past as a copywriter.)

So this is a novel about failing to understand the bigger picture, and in its absence we can see it more clearly. "I think at the moment my life is a little bit sordid. Or pathetic," says Tochtli early on; and we can take this as a statement about a gang-ravaged Mexico or not, as we wish. (The absence of a mother is not only hugely significant, it is, correctly, never explained.)

Later, at a pivotal moment I will not spoil for you, he describes himself as "the most pathetic person in the whole universe", and by the time this hyperbole arrives it seems horribly plausible.

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