

“[An] elegant, enthralling novel.”  
 —*New York Times* [Start Reading](#)




*“A brilliantly imagined, highly readable, and important new literary magazine with the most incongruous title.”*  
 —Joyce Carol Oates



# The Coffin Factory

*The magazine for people who love books.*

- [O-Bits Blog](#)
- [Current Issue](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Subscribe • Purchase](#)
- [Find a Bookstore](#)
- [The Library Donation Project](#)

## Review • *Down the Rabbit Hole* by Juan Pablo Villalobos

October 3, 2012

Reviewed by *Randy Rosenthal*



Writing a story about a very serious and sensitive subject is much easier when the protagonist of the story is a child. Oskar Schell was able to discuss the 9-11 attacks in Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, and Momo was able to talk about everything taboo in Romain Gary’s *The Life Before Us*. In order to address Mexico’s out of control drug-cartel fueled violence, Juan Pablo Villalobos has created Tochtli, the child narrator of *Down the Rabbit Hole*, the Mexican author’s first novel to be translated into English. At a very slim seventy pages, the novel is sure to establish Villalobos a U.S. readership, as *Down the Rabbit Hole* has already been published in thirteen countries and nominated for the *Guardian* First Book award.

Similar to Momo and Oskar Shell, Tochtli is described as precocious and odd child. He lives in a palace, and has millions of pesos, dollars, and euros. He collects hats from all over the world, memorizes samurai films, keeps eagles, macaws, lions and tigers, and what he really wants is a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus, but despite all this, Tochtli is “devastatingly desperately bored,” because all his days are the same. Tochtli has frequent stomach pains, which a doctor attributed to a psychosomatic illness from the loss of his mother, but he tries not to cry because he’s been told “people who cry are faggots.” Tochtli learned this from his father, Yolcaut, the head of a large drug cartel referred to in the media simply as The King. On television, Tochtli watches the news and sees corpses, which he knows are made with “orifices”— he explains that “orifices are holes you make in people so their blood comes out.” Sitting next to his father, Tochtli sees severed heads and body parts on the TV screen, without being aware that what he is seeing is the result of his father’s business.

Juan Pablo Villalobos has done a masterful job creating a child narrator, and with Rosalind Harvey’s smooth translation, we are in awe when Villalobos delivers lines like: “educated people really do know a lot of things from books, but they know nothing about life. This wasn’t the writer’s mistake. It was humanity’s mistake.”

*Down the Rabbit Hole* is, on the surface, innocent, clever and lovable, but its implications are deeply disturbing. One day Tochtli will likely be heir to his father’s business, responsible for countless murders and cruelties. *Down the Rabbit Hole* is a remarkable reflection on the uncontrollable *narco* violence that defines contemporary Mexico. And it’s an absolute must read.

Translated from the Spanish by Rosalind Harvey  
 Farrar, Straus and Giroux, October 2012