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# Down the Rabbit Hole

Review by Ángel Gurría-Quintana

Juan Pablo Villalobos's use of a child protagonist offers a shocking perspective on the drug war in Mexico

Recent headlines from Mexico make for grim reading. The escalation of conflict between government and drug cartels has altered the cultural landscape. So warped have perceptions become, so immune are people to horror, that what once seemed barbarous – mass executions, beheadings – has become the norm.

*Down the Rabbit Hole*, the debut novel by Mexican writer Juan Pablo Villalobos, performs an unexpected trick. By dramatically shifting the perspective from which we view the “narco-wars”, it manages to cut through the collective numbness and renew our sense of shock.

The story is told by a young boy, Tochtli, son of drug baron Yolcaut. Unable to commingle in the real world, he lives in a golden cage – his father's “palace”. At once pampered and neglected, Tochtli cultivates his fascination with hats, samurai swords, guillotines, dictionaries and Liberian pygmy hippos.

For one so young, Tochtli is tragically conversant with the various ways in which people meet their maker – “the most common ones are with orifices. Orifices are holes you make in people so their blood comes out. Bullets from pistols make orifices, and knives can make orifices too.”

He is also chillingly casual about other forms of violence: “We Mexicans don't use baskets [to collect] cut-off heads. We hand over the severed head in a crate of vintage brandy ... On the TV they showed a photo of [a] head and the truth is he had a really bad hairstyle.” His nonchalant observations, both accurate and detached from the facts by his age, are devastating.

The plot is slight. It involves Tochtli, his father and his tutor – a failed writer – leaving the country in the midst of a campaign of heightened violence. In Tochtli's telling, this becomes an adventure to go in search of his beloved pygmy hippos. The story, as can be expected, ends in heartbreak.

Villalobos's first novel is also the maiden publication for *And Other Stories*, a new subscription-based publishing venture. Their choice of this refreshingly original title

translated with outstanding attention to tone by Rosalind Harvey, signals a welcome interest in writing that is too often confined to the margins.

**Down the Rabbit Hole**, by Juan Pablo Villalobos, translated by Rosalind Harvey, *And Other Stories*, RRP£10, 130 pages



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