

## Juan Pablo Villalobos's "Down the Rabbit Hole" (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/book-review/juan-pablo-villalobos-down-the-rabbit-hole/>)



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Translated from the Spanish  
by Rosalind Harvey  
And Other Stories, 2011

Juan Pablo Villalobos's debut novel is a smart variation on the recent vogue for Latin American "narcoveliterature"; *Down the Rabbit Hole* is told from the point of view not of a gangster, a cop or a prostitute, but that of a young child. Ensnared in the cold and zany milieu of Mexican cocaine deals, political string-pulling and back-alley assassinations, narrator Tochtli is the son of a powerful drug lord known as "The King." A witness to its horrors and yet too young to fully grasp its savagery, it is what Tochtli doesn't quite comprehend that makes *Down the Rabbit Hole* so devastating. His limited understanding—he is a ten-year-old child—paradoxically conveys a deeper and more penetrating image of the darkness at the gang's heart. But Villalobos has greater ambitions still. In addition to the oblique entry he plots into this sinister world, he also looks to take on the idea of Mexico as merely a passive recipient of global machinations past and present.

Tochtli's slightly loopy precociousness and love of long words make this book, on one level, good fun to read. As with any cleverly crafted unreliable narrator, however, we quickly see that his self-assurance is little more than a posture in a bleak world, and his use of adult vocabulary an attempt to shore up the ruins of his terrorized childhood. Early on, a riff on ways to kill a person—"The most normal thing to do is cut off the head, although, actually, you can cut anything"—might make us laugh for its macabre matter-of-fact-ness, but is a shocking confirmation of Tochtli's already easy intimacy with violence. And this acquaintance is felt: he suffers from acute stomach cramps. "According to the doctor," he says, "there was something wrong with my psychology, not my tummy." Only, he has nobody outside of the callous gangworld to help him make sense of such things. Indeed, a surprising number of the surrounding guards and henchmen are mute, we find out, reinforcing his aloneness.

Set apart by the drug money he's been born into, Tochtli spends his time at the gang's palatial hideout watching Samurai movies, learning words from his dictionary and collecting hats from around the world. "I love three-cornered

hats, because they're mad soldiers' hats. You put one on and you feel like running off all on your own to invade the nearest kingdom," he marvels at one point. He's also fond of watching his father's pet lions and tigers eat bumped-off corpses. The plot hinges on his newfound determination to add some Liberian pygmy hippopotamuses to the menagerie; to make up for a white lie, his father takes him on a quest to Liberia to secure a couple of these near-extinct creatures.

As wanted men, Tochtli's father and tutor assume false names for the trip to Liberia and, once there, only venture from their hotel for the night safaris. All this is related in clipped detail that convinces because Villalobos has such a sure grasp of what Tochtli is and isn't interested in; fixated by the prospect of the hippos, and used to his father getting what he wants, he doesn't pay much mind to the idea of made-up names, and being holed up in a hotel watching his dad get drunk isn't that different from home anyway. The book keeps a tight rein on context, and emotional nuance is severely restricted; things are glaringly either black or white. We hardly ever see or understand more than Tochtli—for example by hearing other characters' speech. Given the woozy oppressiveness of *Down the Rabbit Hole's* world, the reader begins to hunger for the occasional perspective outside of Tochtli's—and this drives the narrative.

One of the things Tochtli can't comprehend is the constant stream of headless bodies on TV, though he knows full well they are victims of internecine narco-strife. Why are they being killed in this way, he wonders, when they "[aren't] even king[s]"? Tochtli loves the subject of the French Revolution, returning time and again to his admiration for Robespierre et al. and the efficiency of the guillotine. This may be nothing but a prism for his concerns about his "monarch" father, but it is harped on to such an extent that one can't help but want to dig deeper. It runs parallel to, and occasionally grinds up against, the nagging themes of democracy's failures and imperialism; for example the names the group's guides in Liberia take on, possibly to protect themselves from identification: John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, poster boys for failed democratic hopes if ever there were any; or, whenever Tochtli's tutor is annoyed, the way he centers the day's lesson around "the atomic bomb . . . war, the economy . . . imperialists... [and] the lousy fucking Gringos." There is a moment (that I won't spoil) involving the captured hippos—whom Tochtli names Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI—that, by wrenching empathy for these two animals out of a novel-world of such stark unemotion, perhaps provides the key to these wide-reaching questions but, crucially, stops just short of answering them for us. Significant in all this—in proliferating the possible interpretations and generating intrigue—is Tochtli's tantalizingly undeveloped knowledge; he reports these things, but because he lacks the context to explain them, the reader is compelled to fill in the gaps.

Perhaps, I thought, Villalobos, a Mexican living in Barcelona, wanted to ensure Tochtli couldn't be reduced by Western readers to nothing more than the sad product of a "failed state." Tochtli stands for an awful lot more—by prompting so many possible, and sometimes contradictory, ideas about where he stands in relation to the imperialist drive to export democracy. At the very least, Mexico, whose own 1910 revolution, remember, was sponsored by the United States, is situated at an intersection of global histories and politics far more complex than drug deals and organized crime.

New publishers And Other Stories are to be praised for bringing such an alert and unconventionally literary work to readers in English. The decision to place the translation in the hands of bright young translator Rosalind Harvey is also worthy of mention; she brings energy and inventiveness to the task, rendering Tochtli's deadpan nuttiness in suitably limpid prose—no mean feat. Picking her way through a slang-riddled and heavily vernacular Spanish, it must have been tempting to "clean up" the prose and make it more conventionally musical when Tochtli becomes repetitious, jackhammering away about his many obsessions, but this of course would have been to cut off the story's very lifeblood. This small book is a great achievement, and Harvey more than equal to it.

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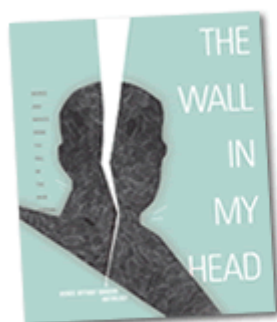
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Thomas Bunstead works in subtitling. He has translation work forthcoming on the Out of the Wings Web site and in a documentA publication. Having attended the Summer School at the British Centre for Literary Translation in Norwich this summer, where he worked with author Eduardo Halfon and translator Anne McLean, he was picked to do a mentorship under Margaret Jull Costa, which is currently underway. He is also an author in his own right, with numerous short stories to his name, and has recently completed a first novel, a work of historical fiction, about which he is currently in discussions with agents. He also contributes reviews and interviews to the *Independent on Sunday*, the *TLS*, *3ammagazine.com* and the *Paris Review*. [www.throwyourlaptopdownthestairs.blogspot](http://www.throwyourlaptopdownthestairs.blogspot)

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