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Newly Released Books

‘The Middlesteins,’ by Jami Attenberg, and More

By SUSANNAH MEADOWS

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DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

By Juan Pablo Villalobos

Translated by Rosalind Harvey

75 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$12.

Rabbit hole indeed. The first page drops us in to the weird existence of Tochtli, a Mexican drug lord’s 7-year-old son and the narrator of this debut novelette. Confined to a walled-off mansion, he spends his days figuring out what he wants his father to buy him next (a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus for example) and learning about warfare from his tutor. Sometimes his father gives him lessons too, like letting him watch the guards beat a man. “They definitely killed him,” Tochtli concludes, “because later I saw Itzpapalotl go past with her mop and bucket.” As comfortable as Tochtli seems in his world, his stomach ailments give him away. Showing how a child absorbs violence without awareness that something is wrong is a tricky endeavor. Mr. Villalobos nails it.