

[Review of Contemporary Fiction](#)

Álvaro Enrigue. *Decencia*. Editorial Anagrama, 2011. 228 pp. Paper: €17.50.

It is 1973 and the wealthy septuagenarian Longinos Brumell Villaseñor accidentally witnesses a terrorist attack on the U.S. Consulate in Guadalajara, for which he is kidnapped and taken on the road to Mexico City. The adventure develops into a sublimely ridiculous Stockholm-Lima Syndrome as Longinos's Marxist captors, the twin brothers Justicia and their domineering mother, realize that their prisoner can help them elude the snares of Mexico's security forces. Longinos's journey across the landscape of central Mexico prompts a fascinating reverie on his youth, when he survived the brutal violence of the Mexican Revolution and thrived in the heady heydays of its aftermath, including his dangerous, impassioned affair with La Flaca Osorio, lustrous wife of Lieutenant Colonel Jaramillo, his employer and protector. These two tightly braided storylines told in alternating chapters make *Decencia* (*Decency*) a dyadic zeitroman in which Enrigue deftly inverts his first- and third-person narratives until finally and seamlessly uniting past and present. Though a witness to modern history, Longinos is incapable of taking dramatic action, partially because his sensual cowardice belies any decency he might have demonstrated, and partially because his life is overshadowed by "the black blessing" of the ferocious "Archangel" Anton Cisniegas: rancher, despotic revolutionary general, and implacable capitalist bureaucrat. Their strangely symbiotic camaraderie offers a sardonic reply to the flawed, ineluctable heroism of Carlos Fuentes's *Artemio Cruz*. Longinos admits, "my life stands for everything that's wrong with this country," and in the nascent narco-trafficking Mexico over which he and Cisniegas preside, decency is ultimately defined by the uneasy honor among criminals. Replete with numerous finely drawn characters, gripping episodes, wise humor, and a chromatic, gemlike prose that surprises to the very end, *Decencia*'s masterful scrutiny, revision, and humanization of history's wrenching emotional complexity recalls other excellent novels of recent years, such as *Soldiers of Salamis* by Javier Cercas, and J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*. [Brendan Riley]