

Head on a plate

OLLIE BROCK

Antonio Ungar

TRES ATAÚDES BLANCOS

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Antonio Ungar's previous novel, *Las orejas del lobo* (The Ears of the Bear, 2004), viewed certain episodes of family life through the eyes of a child after the separation of his parents. Ungar captures both a child's limited perception and the lucidity it can offer. The voice is sustained throughout that short book, which does not have a false note. Ungar's new novel, *Tres ataúdes blancos* (Three White Coffins), is more ambitious in scope. It is set in the run-up to a general election in the fictional Latin American republic of Miranda, a country bedevilled by corruption, media indoctrination and the merciless violence of drug lords. It opens with the assassination in an Italian restaurant of Pedro Akira, the leader of the opposition: an honest man who was set to end the dictatorial regime.

The narrator, José Cantona, is a lonely young alcoholic who lives with his father, his only striking feature a strong physical resemblance to the murdered man. Within hours of the killing, Akira's close associates are at Cantona's door proposing that he impersonate the leader and fake a miraculous recovery. Cantona is a willing double; he feels that acting the role will give his life some meaning and overturn his parents' view of his "absolute uselessness". Learning to imitate Akira's voice and mannerisms, with the help of interviews at his hospital bed and internet videos, Cantona starts to take on some of the politician's personality, alarming the plotters with his impromptu harangues at public appearances at a time when his supposed wounds (three bullets to the head) should not yet allow it. For the people, their hero is back. For Cantona, there is a new purpose in life. He begins to fall in love with the woman who is playing the part of his nurse.

This narrative strategy recedes in importance as the novel develops, and something gets lost in the transition from a lyrical portrait of an anti-hero's encounters with anxious, cocaine-snorting aides to an outright political satire. Some of the portraits of villainous drug-dealers and politicians, and the risible statism of the press, verge on the cartoonish, though they never lose their mordant power. Ungar has said that his descriptions of violence and intimidation are taken from real events and that he had to excise a number of them from his final draft because they appeared implausible. He seems to be most comfortable here when portraying the conscience of an individual. The narrator's overtures to his beloved nurse are virtuoso performances, as are some of his ruminations on cause and effect. Many of these revolve around the bullet-filled head of the candidate and what sort of dish he was eating in his final minutes. In the narrator's imagination, Akira's head is

resting in the plate of cannelloni. Heavy and still and deaf, joined to the compact body of Pedro Akira with a strong, virile neck. Innocent of all the consequences that its stillness was beginning to unleash outside the Italian restaurant Consequences converted into actions which, seen from here, from the necessary distance, look like terrified ants running over each other, ants fleeing their shadows.

The novel's political agenda might have been conveyed more effectively had Ungar maintained the voice of the early chapters, which have some of the wildness and humour of Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, perhaps the most accomplished Latin American dictator novel, a work that loses none of its political power for its resemblance to a prose poem. Some commentators have seen *Tres ataúdes blancos* as a portrait of either present-day Colombia or Hugo Chávez's Venezuela. Ungar has pointed out that it could as easily be Spain in the 1960s, or Argentina in the 1970s, or any other repressive regime in recent history. Its lessons may at times seem overwrought, but they can be widely applied.

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different pieces in which the characters are caught up in circular situations: a man who enters his flat each time he leaves it; a prophet who forgets his revelations and another who foresees everything; a student who takes exam after exam in order to

born with six fingers on each hand, the family disintegrates as a result of everyone's uncertainty as to whether to continue the tradition or abandon it; the family member who narrates the story, his bearings lost, soon turns to drink.

Again, the metaphor is clear: families are stifling sects, and yet when they break down, their individual members fail: another bleak, circular situation. The spirit of the book is neatly summarized by a character in the final story: "Things should