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THREE PERCENT REVIEW



Equal parts stoner pulp thriller and psycho-physiological horror story, a pervasive sense of dread mixes with a cloud of weed smoke to seep into every line of the disturbing, complex *Under This Terrible Sun*. Originally published by illustrious Spanish publishers Editorial Anagrama, *Under This Terrible Sun* is Argentine journalist-cum-novelist Carlos Busqued's debut novel in both Spanish and now English.

I don't read many gruesome novels, so I don't know exactly which other books to compare this novel to, but the vibe of *Under This Terrible Sun* reminds me of the creeping evil that saturates the movie *Se7en*, and not in the least because most of the deadly sins crop up throughout Busqued's novel in various guises. The plot of *Under This Terrible Sun* is comprised of a convoluted series of events, with only a few central characters around whom the action takes place, and most of the action itself is moved forward by a true old-fashioned villain, who, in the end, receives his comeuppance through a deus ex machina event that wraps up this fucked-up story of greed, sloth, and murder a little too nicely. But boy, let me tell you, the story that leads to the ending is worth reading. The first time I read it, I was disconcerted by how easily I was flying through the book, how easily my eyes and mind were gliding over the events taking place on the page, which were pretty gruesome. But then I went back through the novel a second time to prepare for this review and realized that this story had more going on than I realized at first—and that was the most stomach-churning part: our society has become so dehumanized that we've become immune to horrific images and reports of violence. Nothing shocks us anymore. This book didn't shock me, and that's the disturbing part. It should have.

The novel opens with Javier Cetarti, a shiftless loser who was fired from his job six months earlier and who was just about to run out of money and, more importantly, marijuana, when he receives a phone call from a guy named Duarte in a tiny village called Lapachito, far to the north of Cordoba, where Cetarti lives. Duarte has some bad news: Cetarti's mother and brother had been killed by his mother's live-in boyfriend, who also killed himself as the coup de grace of the grisly bloodbath. Cetarti hardly reacts to the news, but gets in the car and makes the 600+ kilometer drive up north when Duarte tells him there is some sort of life insurance policy involved, and Cetarti has the chance to cash in:

Of all the news Duarte had given him the night before, Cetarti had been most motivated to drive to Lapachito by the news that there was a life insurance policy to collect. He had been booted out of his job six months before (lack of initiative, discouraging behavior), and he had eaten through almost all of his compensation without lifting a finger.

For a dude who sits around smoking pot all day, refusing to work, this is a pretty sweet chance, and it also forms the introduction, within the first five pages, to Cetarti's questionable moral impulse. This lack of morality becomes one of the main themes that dominates Cetarti's universe vividly portrayed by Busqued in *Under This Terrible Sun*.

Cetarti arrives in his mother's village, a wasteland that seems like the set of a horror story come to life: the houses are sinking into the mud caused by an industrial accident, the city is literally collapsing in on itself, poisonous beetles are taking over (although Cetarti is pretty sure there are no poisonous beetles, everyone tells him the beetles he sees everywhere are poisonous), and the residents can't be bothered to leave because they just get used to it, as Duarte tells Cetarti. Welcome to Lapachito; it may be its own layer of hell.

BOOK INFORMATION

Under This Terrible Sun

By Carlos Busqued

Translated by Megan McDowell

Reviewed by Will Evans

[Frisch & Co.](#)

140 pages, ebook

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\$6.99

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Under This Terrible Sun by Carlos Busqued

Reviewed by Will Evans

Equal parts stoner pulp thriller and psycho-physiological horror story, a pervasive sense of dread mixes with a cloud of weed smoke to seep into every line of the disturbing, complex *Under This Terrible Sun*. Originally published by illustrious Spanish publishers. . .

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Wigram by Daniel Canty

Reviewed by P. T. Smith

From the start, Daniel Canty's *Wigram*, published by Canadian press Talonbooks, is obviously a novel of form. Known also as a graphic designer in Quebec, Canty takes those skills and puts them towards this "novel of inventory" and creates a . . .

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Duarte lets Cetarti in on the life insurance scheme he's concocted. Turns out, Cetarti's mom's live-in boyfriend, Molina, took out a life insurance policy before the massacre, and Cetarti could technically lay claim to the loot. It involves some questionable dealings, greasing the palms of government officials, and it doesn't take long before you realize Duarte is hardly an ally, he's as shady as it gets and completely incapable of doing Good. But he's still promising Cetarti a sizeable payday, and he supplies Cetarti with tons of good weed, so Cetarti can't complain.

Cetarti joins Duarte to visit his mother's house, where the killing took place, and when they open the door they meet Molina's ex-wife, who is there cleaning everything up. Cetarti goes through his mother's and brother's belongings without emotion, takes a few items, including what turns out to be keys to his brother's apartment in Cordoba. The next day, he visits Duarte at home and gets a little creeped out, but rather laconically, as is Cetarti's style, by some of the pornography that Duarte keeps laying around his house. Along with building a fleet of intricately-detailed model airplanes that are referenced throughout the novel, and paralleled by the characters watching a series of military documentaries on TV, Duarte is in the process of digitizing a fleet of brutal VHS porno tapes he'd collected, with titles too vile to mention here. He explains his choice of this particularly violent and nasty pornography to Cetarti:

"There's some pornography you don't watch to jerk off, you watch it more out of curiosity about how far the human species will go . . . This is what I was telling you is interesting, to see the limits of what a person is capable of doing or letting others do to them. That old woman, I picture her getting dressed with her ass all destroyed, taking the subway, buying chocolates for her grandchildren with the money she just earned by letting them do that to her . . ."

Duarte is obsessed with seeing how far the human species will go—and not just on video. A man of action, Duarte is a vibrant character: completely evil, completely amoral, completely unsympathetic, and for all of these reasons, a fascinating character. Although he commits all sorts of extortion schemes for money, he seems far more driven by the thought of pushing human bodies to their breaking point than in receiving money for anything. Which is terrifying.

Around this time we meet his henchman, a fat, shiftless pothead named Danielito, who is the son of the deceased Molina and Molina's ex-wife. Duarte uses Danielito's basement to hold hostages, seeking a ransom from the victim's family at the same time as he abuses and violates the victims. Danielito is an all-too-willing accomplice to the torture, feeding the victims, but otherwise staying out of the way and letting Duarte enact his most revolting fantasies on his victims (fortunately, only alluded to).

The point of view at this point in the novel begins to alternate between Cetarti and Danielito, Duarte is never the focal point, the narrative proceeds through Cetarti and Danielito's THC-reddened eyes, but he is the connection between the two characters (who don't meet until much later in the novel), and only through Duarte do the parallels between their weed-soaked lives become evident: they sit around, smoke weed, eat sometimes, and watch nature and war documentaries on TV constantly. The subjects of these documentaries (elephants in southeast Asia, giant squids, WWII) recur over and over again in both characters' lives.

The interplay between inhuman humans and mysterious deadly creatures of land and sea forms one of the most interesting themes of the novel, which shouldn't be surprising given the novel's epigraph, taken from Alfred Tennyson's "The Kraken": ". . . Then once by man and angels to be seen, / In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die."

In one particularly creepy scene from which the novel's title is lifted, Danielito's mother asks him to accompany her to another shitty village far from Lapachito in order to steal the bones of her firstborn son, who died before he was a year old and who, much to Danielito's chagrin, is also named Daniel, and leads Danielito to fantasize about elephants he'd heard from Duarte were man-killers in southeast Asia, a theme that is first raised in conversation between Cetarti and Duarte much earlier in the novel. This particular scene is also an excellent example of Busqued's narrative technique, and illustrates the overall vibe of the novel:

bq. He couldn't avoid a shudder when he read, painted on the tin heart: DANIEL MOLINA 2-12-1972/10-4-1973. He looked at his mother. She was staring at the sunken earth. bq. "Poor thing, all these years under this terrible sun." bq. He dug apprehensively. The earth was soft, but he felt no urge to speed up. He was soaked in sweat. Around the cemetery there was an island of empty land, and after a hundred meters the bush-covered mountain. He remembered the documentary about the elephants of Mal Bazaar. He imagined one of those elephants emerging from the forest. He imagined it coming towards them. A complex and powerful body that shook the earth at each step. But the elephant wouldn't attack them, he thought. It would approach them calmly and with a certain curiosity. It would stop beside them, touching them gently with its trunk. And then it would fall to the ground. Or disappear into thin air. Or something, anything else. But it wouldn't hurt them. "Almost every *mahout* is an alcoholic," he remembered. How nice to be an alcoholic, he thought, how nice to be murdered by an elephant. Something, anything else.

Cetarti eventually goes home to Cordoba and moves out of his apartment into the place where his brother had been living, accumulating massive amounts of junk (bug collections, *Readers Digest*, orange peels) in a strange part of town called Hugo Wast, a mysterious neighborhood where nobody owns their houses, but rather squats in them, located near the municipal slaughterhouse, which gives the area a particular smell when the wind blows in the right way. Cetarti eventually gets the money from Duarte and—to make a long story short and to glaze over Duarte doing some dastardly deeds and Danielito's mother morphing into a very interesting and strong secondary character on whom many words could be written alone—Cetarti eventually gets wrapped up in another one of Duarte's schemes, which leads to the rather abrupt ending (which comes about a bit too neatly for me).

As I said, I'm not one for gruesome novels, so I can assure you that this novel, despite being disturbing, is worth reading. It's shocking and interesting in ways that literary novels rarely achieve. I mentioned *Se7en* above: it's actually a pretty good comparison, the same creeping dread and inhuman elements are at play, which is actually refreshing to read in Busqued's telling, capturing some of the more interesting morally-questionable elements of humanity that are usually only portrayed in Scandinavian (or other styles of) detective thrillers. Busqued is a good writer, sparse at times, maintaining a narrative distance from the characters' impulses while simultaneously opening the door into some of their thoughts. His sentences are seemingly simplistic in construction, but all the while gather



Between Friends by Amos Oz

Reviewed by Dan Vitale

Throughout his career—in fact from his very first book, *Where the Jackals Howl* (1965)—the renowned Israeli writer Amos Oz has set much of his fiction on the kibbutz, collective communities he portrays as bastions of social cohesion and stultifying conformity. . .

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The Corpse Washer by Sinan Antoon

Reviewed by Grant Barber

Antoon gives us a remarkable novel that in 184 pages captures the experience of an Iraqi everyman who has lived through the war with Iran in the first half of the 1980s, the 1991 Gulf War over the Kuwaiti invasion, . . .

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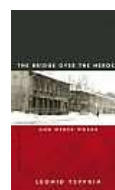


Starlite Terrace by Patrick Roth

Reviewed by Tiffany Nichols

Every fictional work set in L.A. begins with a slow crawl through its streets in the early hours of the morning right after sunrise. Maybe it's always done this way to emphasize the vast sprawl of the city and highlight. . .

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The Bridge Over the Neroch & Other Works by Leonid Tsypkin

Reviewed by Vincent Francone

Not long ago, Nick Laird wrote an interesting article for *The Guardian* on the Slow Food Movement, an idea sprung from modern dissatisfaction with fast food. Participants gather to enjoy homemade meals cooked for as long as necessary. The emphasis. . .

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What Darkness Was by Inka Parei

Reviewed by P. T. Smith

Of all the Holocaust novel genres, the most interesting is often the one that doesn't describe clearly defined horrors, written with a clarity that brings the events into

elements and build up to a pulse-quickenning crescendo, all told via the quality work of translator, Megan McDowell (a UT-Dallas translation program alumna!).

the present, whether written in present tense or not, but the one. . .

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As one of new ebook-only publisher Frisch & Co.'s first titles, they have done an admirable job of bringing Busqued's novel into English as part of their unique partnership with Editorial Anagrama, in which they will publish two books a year from the Spanish-language publishers in digital formats. It remains to be seen if Frisch & Co. will partner with anybody to do physical copies of these books, but either way, in any format, *Under This Terrible Sun* is a damn good read.

tags: [carlos busqued](#), [frisch & co.](#), [megan mcdowell](#), [spanish literature](#), [under this terrible sun](#), [will evans](#)

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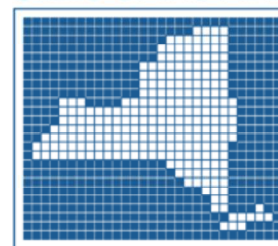
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