

BOOKS

A very Mexican shaggy dog story — from Juan Pablo Villalobos

I'll Sell You a Dog will be reassuringly familiar terrain for fans of Villalobos — satirical, sleazy and head-twistingly smart

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(Photo: Getty)

3 September 2016 9:00 AM

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I'll Sell You a Dog *Juan Pablo Villalobos, translated by Rosalind Harvey*

And Other Stories, pp.244, £10

The Mexican author Juan Pablo Villa-lobos's first short novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole* (*Fiesta en la madriguera*), was published in English in 2011. It was narrated by the young son of a drug baron living in a luxurious, if heavily guarded palace, whose everyday familiarity with hitmen, prostitutes and assorted methods of disposing of unwanted corpses was both hilarious and unsettling. The novella was the first work of translated fiction to be shortlisted for the (now sadly defunct) *Guardian* First Book Award and was described admiringly by the writer Ali Smith as 'funny, convincing, appalling'.

Villalobos's new novel, his third, has again been translated by Rosalind Harvey, whose work on *Down the Rabbit Hole* was nominated for the PEN translation prize. Its narrator is a 78-year-old former taco seller, whose zone of confinement is a Mexico City retirement home rather than a drug lord's fortified hideout; but in most other respects this is familiar terrain for Villalobos fans. *I'll Sell you a Dog* is satirical, sleazy and often head-twistingly smart.



Teo, short for Teodoro, lives in a block whose other inhabitants include a lot of cockroaches and a pretentious 'literary salon' that meets on the first floor; Teo considers both to be infestations. He keeps a copy of the cultural philosopher Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* to hand, a book with which he is obsessed and which he employs as a weapon, both intellectually and literally, to discourage unwanted callers and to squash cockroaches. The members of the literary salon — who believe, despite his furious protestations to the contrary, that Teo must be a novelist — are working their way through *In Search of Lost Time*, 'all seven volumes... 4,230 pages long, hardback, with leaves thin as tracing paper and weighing in at almost three and a half kilos (those with arthritis were excused)'. The cockroaches, meanwhile, are as 'cool as cucumbers'.

It's a bold writer who sets up a comic riff counterpointing the work of Adorno and Proust, one which then develops into a dominant theme: how we mingle memory and art to make sense of our often hap-hazard, pest-ridden lives. It's an even braver one who, in the course of the same novel and for comedic effect, kills off a series of (fictional) dogs in ever more macabre circumstances so that they can be sold to streetcorner taco sellers as meaty fillings. But Villalobos is fearless in pursuing his characters wherever they take him. 'I've already told you I'm not writing a novel,' Teo insists at one point:

At our age people make things up not because they have to or as some kind of strategy, they do it just because, for the fun of it, they invent stuff so as to tangle things up and so then they have to untangle them afterwards. Untangling tangles is very entertaining.

6/9/2016

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The pleasures of this grubby, funny little novel lie in that tangled knot of characters and ideas; but its brilliance lies in how Villalobos unpicks it, revealing as he does so that it was never very tangled to begin with. A shaggy dog story with a very distinctive flavour.