

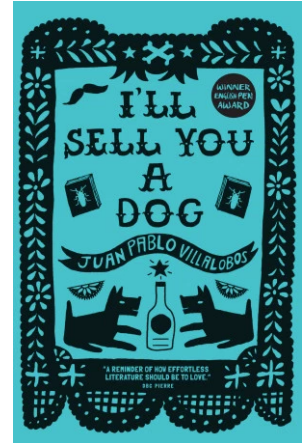
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Peak District linguist writes on books in English, German and Spanish, on literary events and on translation.

I'll sell you a dog- Juan Pablo Villalobos translated by Rosalind Harvey

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I laughed out loud- in restaurants, on the beach, in the plane- reading this brilliantly comic novel by Villalobos, recently published by And Other Stories in translation by Rosalind Harvey. The novel is set in Mexico City and opens with narrator Teo describing the seniors' residence he has just moved in to: the residents are engaged in a hectic round of self improvement activities, foremost of which is the literary salon run by the 'dictator' Francesca. They invite Teo to join them, Francesca insisting during their frequent chance meetings in the lift that he is a novelist, which he strenuously denies. And so we are plunged straight into several strands of this heady narrative, at a speed quite unlike the ancient cranky lift 'ascending and descending like the zip on a pair of trousers': the passion of the 'literary fundamentalists', the verbal sparring between Teo and Francesca, the vaguely lewd mindset of our narrator and the slippery identity of the novelist.



From this beginning the narrative continues on three levels. Teo's daily round of drinking, hanging out in bars and mildly lusting after his new neighbours provides the background to his account of the residents' shenanigans and introduces us to a cast of gloriously eccentric characters bordering on the surreal: Juliette, the greengrocer whose business has provided not a single item of veg for consumption but rather tomatoes to chuck during political demonstrations; Mao, a hangover from the 60s, sporting a filthy T-shirt with a Sendero Luminoso slogan; Willem, the earnest Mormon gringo, his southern drawl beautifully rendered by the translator.

Scenes from Teo's past are gradually dropped into the present day narrative. We are told on page 5 that his mother was killed in the earthquake of 1985, so this loss is no surprise, but family events prior to that, in particular how Teo ends up earning his living as a taco seller, are revealed with economy and understatement. And despite these sections being peopled with crazy and florid characters from the art world, and the dialogue as witty as the present day narrative, the mood evoked here is somehow more sombre, as if in a minor key.

Along with the two time frames a third dimension develops- a kind of meta narrative where fiction, creating fiction and reading fiction are interrogated. On one level Francesca raises the question whether the first person narrator is the writer of the novel and this idea is explored in any number of amusing twists and turns throughout: Teo assigns a name to himself and his neighbours, who are also characters in his novel, with a flourish, as if at random, yet insists on the correct spelling and pronunciation with the particularity of the pedant. On another level reading and writing provide the subject matter for the action- the literary fundamentalists are reading Proust and their copies are taken hostage, Teo is as wedded to his copy of Adorno's 'Aesthetic Theory' as Willem to his bible and devastated when it is stolen, both characters and the narrator play with and subvert quotations to hilarious effect.

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And the hilarious effect is superbly rendered in English by this pitch perfect translation-no mean feat to render consistently the voice of the witty and cynical 80 year old Theo, to replicate the at times remorseless banter of the dialogue, to render authentic the idiom of different time periods, to maintain pace and the fizzing pithiness of the punch line. And what about those poor old dogs? We see all human emotion expressed around them, from the sentimental attachment of Teo's mother, to the irritation and scary indifference of the literary salon when the labrador interrupts their reading. Quite apart from their commercial value to our cynical narrator. So if you fancy some witty, dazzling entertainment with ideas that will ricochet around your head long past reading, give this book a go-you will not be sold a pup but a real dog!