

I'll Sell You a Dog by Juan Pablo Villalobos review – whimsy, wit and echoes of Wonderland

A Mormon, a Maoist and an irresistible muse are among the characters in a retired salesman's reflections on life in Mexico City

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Spanish humour tends to relish excess and bombast and find virtue in being forcefully explicit. It is therefore surprising to find a Mexican writer who handles the technique of understatement so deftly: Juan Pablo Villalobos's new book is one of the wittiest, most whimsical, most enjoyable novels to have been published in Spanish for a long time. The excellence of Villalobos in this English translation is due of course to the skill of Rosalind Harvey, who has also seamlessly rendered the varieties of Mexican Spanish into different tones of English, preserving their endemic nature without turning the characters into cross-dressed Cockneys or Liverpoolians.

"I don't believe in objective narrators," Villalobos once said. The hero of *I'll Sell You a Dog* is anything but. The 78-year old Teo lives in a rundown building in Mexico City with a group of other elderly people, recalling and recounting his life and varying the chronicle according to his mood. A retired taco salesman and would-be painter, his unlikely guide to life is the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, in whose *Aesthetic Theory* Teo finds an answer for almost anything, revelations that he then haphazardly jots down in a notebook. He spends his days counting his daily intake of alcohol, the better to manage his meagre savings, and trying to seduce either Francesca, the head of a pretentious reading club in his building, or Juliette, the local greengrocer who believes she is spearheading the revolution to come. This unusual cast is joined by three young outsiders who, each in their own way, upsets Teo's routine: Juliette's granddaughter, the sweet, innocent Dorotea; an undercover Maoist predictably called Mao; and Wilhelm (pronounced Willem), a Mormon from Utah who insists on bringing to Teo the word of the Lord. Dogs, of course, come into the story: dogs who lead charmed dogs' lives and suffer ignominious dogs' deaths, much like their owners.

Villalobos's second novel, *Quesadillas*, was published in Spanish as *Si viviéramos en un lugar normal* (If We Lived in a Normal Place), a title that applies to the whole of Villalobos's profound and hilarious view of Mexico, where things are as normal as Alice's Wonderland. His first novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, alluded to that world, and Alice would not find Villalobos's Mexico all that strange after her encounters with the Mad Hatter and the Cheshire Cat. There is a Carrollian logical zaniness in this latest work, too.

Like Alice's story, *I'll Sell You a Dog* ends with an awakening. In the case of Alice, the final passage is from the world of dreams or nightmares to the real world of every day. In the case of Teo, it is from the real everyday world (as Teo sees or imagines it) to the world of fiction. The narrative of events is the same in both, but the story we were reading as a factual account of Teo's life

becomes the imagined novel Teo has refused up to now to write. For the sake of Francesca, who has magically transformed herself from an object of desire into Teo's muse, *I'll Sell You a Dog* comes gloriously into being.

. *I'll Sell You a Dog* by Juan Pablo Villabolos (And Other Stories, £10). To order a copy for £8.20, go to bookshop.theguardian.com or call 0330 333 6846. Free UK p&p over £10, online orders only. Phone orders min. p&p of £1.99.

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