
La mitad mejor

Author: Marcos Herrera

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Herrera's novel is set in the rubbish dumps of Buenos Aires and follows marginalised characters in a thriller format, with a crime and revenge, but without detectives or police in 12 brief chapters. The action is narrated at street level during a Buenos Aires summer heat. There's something of a freak show. The tone is Cormac McCarthy-ish, even Tarantino-ish. It is very well done, disturbing and odd.

The novel follows Leira living by the rubbish dump and the river. He is a petty pimp and goes to borrow a spade from a neighbour, a giant of a man who has lost his wife and is a born-again Christian. The action is triggered by a young thug burning himself alive in an abandoned ware-house. These two neighbours hate each other. The third main character Mulno is a hack and a private detective. The plot revolves around drug-taking, prostitution, drugged, illicit boxing and a new drug being created in a lab by a mad scientist from transparent worms found in the rubbish dump. Two tough pimps called Pico and Perro seek out a boy witness because they know he knows and want to eliminate him. When they try to catch him, they shoot the Bible-quoting hulk Juan, cut the ears off a boy and beat up the rest. The revenge sets in. Meanwhile, a gang run by an ex-student anarchist nicknamed Ho Chi Minh, decides to raid the illicit boxing venue with the doped boxers. The plot is resolved in the actual raid, shooting and wounding. Juan outwits the pimps, raids a provincial church on the run and floats the stolen crucifix into a muddy stream as two provincial cops arrive to arrest him and the novel ends.

The style forces the reader to refocus urban reality through an often baroque and rich use of metaphor. There is an excessive tone and style, a piling-up of sordid details, an underworld paranoia that verges on black humour. I found it odd and original, a new take on the thriller / detective genre in the margins of the not named megacity Buenos Aires. This novel is well-worth translating.

This is a summary of the reader's report by Jason Wilson.

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