

Roberto Bolaño

Reading Roberto Bolaño is a vertiginous experience: exasperating, confusing, enlightening, rewarding. Think Paul Auster—but in a parallel universe where poets and writers are revered as lunatic mystics.

BY PATRICK SMITH

ROBERTO BOLAÑO, WHO SPENT MUCH OF HIS LIFE in Mexico, was one of the most respected, notorious, and iconoclastic writers in Latin America by the time of his death in his adopted Spain in 2003, at age 50. With poet Mario Santiago, he spearheaded *infrarealismo*, a 1970s poetry movement that took its aesthetic from “Dadaism, Mexican style.” The poets and members of Bolaño’s “gang” would interrupt readings by shouting their own verse over the din. It was a short-lived literary revolution, but it gave voice to Bolaño’s creativity. As his reputation grew, he focused on short fiction and novels, reaching the pinnacle of his career with *The Savage Detectives* (★★★★ July/Aug 2007), first published in 1998 to immediate critical acclaim and winning the Rómulo Gallegos Prize, the Latin American equivalent of Britain’s Booker Prize, for best novel. Today, as translations appear of his work (Bolaño wrote nine novels, two short story collections, and five books of poetry), American readers have begun to embrace his genius.

Born in Santiago, Chile, the son of a truck driver and a teacher, Bolaño was captivated by literature at an early age. Having developed his literary consciousness while living with his family in Mexico, where they had moved in the late 1960s, Bolaño, who was dyslexic, dropped out of high school and became a poet.

In 1973, Bolaño left Mexico to support President Salvador Allende in Chile and “to help build the revolution.” When Augusto Pinochet rose to power after a coup, Bolaño, who played only a minor role in any political intrigue (he acted as a messenger between dissidents, the story goes), was arrested. Only a chance encounter with a couple of old classmates who were prison guards in the Pinochet regime saved him from doing hard time.

These and others of Bolaño’s adventures as a young man—including his wanderings through Europe (particularly Spain) and Latin America, during which time he became a heroin addict and lived the life of the literary tramp (he eventually died of chronic hepatitis)—would find their way into his fiction. He shaped his experience to fit his

increasing need to catalog the world with his encyclopedic and sometimes maddeningly labyrinthine prose and plots. Those stories almost always are underpinned by Bolaño’s strong belief, bordering on obsession, that life and literature are two sides of the same coin.

To be sure, Bolaño’s disdain for the literary mainstream grew from his own passion for the words on the page and his disappointment with contemporary literature, which he saw as derivative, even if the post–World War II boom that included the rise of magical realism had reignited Latin American literature.

But much of that disdain came from the author’s own uneasy relationship with the past and his lack of a strong national identity.

In a *New York Times* profile, Larry Rohter observes that “whereas Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Mario Vargas Llosa of Peru and Carlos Fuentes of Mexico all identify closely with their native lands in their important works, Bolaño makes his protagonists vagabonds who move from country to country, usually on some quest doomed to disappointment.”

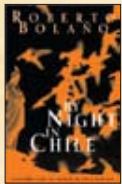
The great irony of Bolaño’s career is that he transformed himself from a poet steeped in surrealism and experimental forms to a writer of fiction, a move made to support his family in Spain after the birth of a son in 1990. Until then, he had largely supported himself with a series of menial jobs.

Bolaño got his improbable start in fiction by writing for and winning a handful of contests in Latin America. Considered his major novel, *The Savage Detectives*, a mélange of literary, detective, and fantastic forms, was influenced not only by the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, a particular favorite of Bolaño’s, but also by American writers such as James Ellroy, Philip K. Dick, and Cormac McCarthy. Given the work’s intensity and Bolaño’s careful attention to craft—critics often comment not only on the number of poets in his fiction but also on the author’s hard-edged poetic prose—critics could hardly call such driving ambition a sellout.

FIRST IN TRANSLATION

By Night in Chile (2004)

Translated by Chris Andrews



Bolaño's work began to get noticed outside Latin America only after his death in 2003. *By Night in Chile*, his last published novel, is a commentary on the Pinochet regime with which the author clashed in the 1970s. Of the book's protagonist, a dying priest, Philip Herter of the *St. Petersburg Times* writes, "As an author's mouth-piece Father Urrutia surely ranks among the great fictional characters of world literature."

THE STORY: As Chilean priest and literary critic Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix, once a member of the conservative Catholic group Opus Dei, lies on his deathbed, he recalls his past deeds and misdeeds. His rambles about his literary ambitions come to the fore, including a meeting on a moonlit night with the poet Pablo Neruda, and his role in Pinochet's coup comes across as both disturbing and farcical, another example of the banality of evil. A final, startling revelation brings Bolaño's narrative full circle and ushers the priest, who relates the events of his life through a compelling stream of consciousness, into eternity.

"[M]orbidly humorous. ... A powerful reading experience and a work of high literary art, [the author's] final novel invites readers to rediscover a dark chapter in Latin American history and to experience a slice of something like life itself." PHILIP

HERTER, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, 1/11/04

"Chilean writers have depicted as an illness a condition of numbing, if not quite smiling, acquiescence. ... His novel *By Night in Chile* is a 130-page rant—part confession, part justification, part delirium—by a dying man, representative of an intellectual class that the author depicts as alternately tugging its leash and licking it." RICHARD EDER, NEW YORK TIMES, 1/16/04

THE STORY COLLECTION

Last Evenings on Earth (2006)

Translated by Chris Andrews



Bolaño's first story collection focuses on the "melancholy folklore of exile," and these 14 stories echo the patterns of speech and life of the margins of society. "The territory marking my generation is one of rupture," Bolaño said of his desire to escape the shadow of Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and others. "It is the territory of parricide on one hand. And on the other, it is the territory of the Borgesian. One must investigate every fringe, every path that Borges has left behind."

THE STORIES: The opening lines of "Enrique Martín," a story dedicated to his friend and fellow writer Enrique Vila Matas (*Bartleby & Co.*), perfectly capture the book's overriding tone: "A poet can endure anything. Which amounts to saying that a human being can endure anything. But that's not true: there are obviously limits to what a human being can endure. Really endure. A poet, on the other hand, *can* endure anything. We grew up with this conviction. The opening assertion is true, but that way lie ruin, madness, death." All the stories feature young men, many of them writers living on the edge, pessimistically searching for something just beyond their reach—from family to fame.

"Reading Roberto Bolaño is like hearing the secret story, being shown the fabric of the particular, watching the tracks of art and life merge at the horizon and linger there like a dream from which we awake inspired to look more attentively at the world."

FRANCINE PROSE, NEW YORK TIMES, 7/9/06



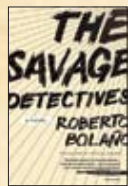
Roberto Bolaño (1953–2003)

THE BREAKTHROUGH NOVEL

The Savage Detectives (2007)

Translated by Natasha Wimmer

♦ RÓMULO GALLEGOS PRIZE



First published in Spanish a decade ago, *The Savage Detectives* marked the author's coming-out party in the English-speaking world. He described it as "a love letter to my generation," and that simple declaration that can only be appreciated by reading Bolaño's complex, poignant, visceral novel in its entirety. (★★★★ July/Aug 2007)

THE STORY: Arturo Belano (the name intentionally evokes the author and appears in others of the author's novels and shorter works) and Ulises Lima go in search of Cesarea Tinajero, an avant-garde Mexican poet rumored to have disappeared into the Sonoran desert 50 years before. The novel's middle section contains dated journal entries from dozens of narrators who fill in the blanks for the years 1976 to 1995 and force the reader to step away from the canvas in order to see the whole picture.

"Curiously, *The Savage Detectives* is both melancholy and fortifying; and it is both narrowly about poetry and broadly about the difficulty of sustaining the hopes of youth. ... Roberto Bolaño's alter ego, Arturo Belano, whose life so closely shadows Bolaño's own (night watchman and dishwasher, life in Paris and Barcelona, and so on) disappears from the story—to re-emerge, of course, as the man willing to 'commit the vulgarity of writing stories,' the man who triumphantly wrote this marvelous, sad, finally sustaining novel." JAMES WOOD, NEW YORK TIMES, 4/15/07

"The narrative of this book stretches across the world and employs a great number of points of view, each with its own startling voice and strange, often tangential, story to tell ... With its strident, utterly believable characters and their stories, Bolaño sends a shot over the bow: When you are done with this book, you will believe there is no engine more powerful than the human voice." EMILY CARTER ROIPHE, MINNEAPOLIS STAR

TRIBUNE, 4/22/07

THE FICTIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA

Nazi Literature in the Americas (2008)

Translated by Chris Andrews



Bolaño analyzes literature with the rigor of an academic, so his *Nazi Literature in America* comes across as the perfect one-two punch: a writer who knows that all writing, regardless of its purpose, might be called fiction; and a book that invents fascist writers only to watch them,

in sketches that hinge on dark comedy, knock themselves down with their own words.

THE STORY: This dictionary profiles 30 fictional literary types, all of whom espouse fascist politics, from across the Americas. Several hail from the United States: a fire-and-brimstone preacher, a football player, a science fiction writer, and the founder of the Aryan Brotherhood. Bolaño adds layer upon layer of convincing biographical and bibliographical material, including appendices that give a nod to the also-rans who didn't make the cut, right-wing propaganda and publishing arms, and the titles turned out by the celebrated writers. All made up, and all worth reading.

"As if he were Borge's wisecracking, sardonic son, Bolaño has meticulously created a tightly woven network of far-right litterateurs and purveyors of belles lettres for whom Hitler was beauty, truth and great lost hope." STACY D'ERASMO, NEW YORK

TIMES, 2/24/08

"It is imaginative, full of a love for literature, and unlikely as it may seem, exceptionally entertaining ... Bolaño's tone—like that of Swift in 'A Modest Proposal'—is non-judgmental and scholarly throughout, no matter how ludicrous or horrible his characters' views and actions." MICHAEL DIRDA, WASHINGTON POST, 3/2/08

FOR FURTHER READING

Distant Star (2005)

Translated by Chris Andrews

Bolaño's view of Chile became particularly jaundiced after Pinochet's rise to power, and *Distant Star* "offers a composite picture of a nation turned upside down. ... Bolaño's literature is about silences and absences, about reevaluating national memory." (Ilan Stevens, Los Angeles Times).

Amulet (2008)

Translated by Chris Andrews

Bolaño wrote this book to eulogize "the heroic deeds of a whole generation of young Latin Americans led to sacrifice." Brief enough to resound with the rhythms of poetry, the author's dialogue with the past is poignant and boisterous. "Of Bolaño's many gifts," Adam Schragin writes in the *San Antonio Express-News*, "this may have been his most resonant—the ability to link our inner stories with the overlapping, continuous march of other, greater histories."

The Romantic Dogs

Translated by Laura Healy

These 44 poems are culled from a two-decade output before Bolaño's turn to fiction. More nostalgic than the prose, they show a brash, vulnerable young man writing with passion and a youthful disregard for the future: "infinity doesn't scare us."

THE POSTHUMOUS EPIC



2666

By Roberto Bolaño, translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer

THE STORY: Hundreds of murders in the Sonoran Desert. Benno von Archimboldi, a reclusive German novelist who hears voices. Obsessed academics who want to know more about Archimboldi. An African-American journalist covering a Mexican boxing match before becoming involved with those murders. Such is the grand mosaic of *2666*. Writers figure prominently here, as in all of Bolaño's works, and the novel's five sections often discuss philosophy, art, and life. The novel hinges, however, on the murders so thoroughly described in the fourth section, "The Part about the Crimes." That story, "the sad American mirror of wealth and poverty and constant, useless metamorphosis," offers gripping, intense, and sometimes documentary detail about the several hundred women who were raped and strangled in the Sonoran Desert (based on a series of real-life murders since 1993 in Ciudad Juarez).

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 912 pages. \$30. ISBN: 0374100144

NY Times Book Review



"A novel like *2666* is its own preserving machine, delivering itself into our hearts, sentence by questing, unassuming sentence; it also becomes a preserving machine for the lives its words fall upon like a forgiving rain, fictional characters and the secret selves hidden behind and enshrined within them: hapless academic critics and a hapless Mexican boxer, the unavenged bodies deposited in shallow graves. By writing across the grain of his doubts about what literature can do, how much it can discover or dare pronounce the names of our world's disasters, Bolaño has proven it can do anything, and for an instant, at least, given a name to the unnamable."

JONATHAN LETHEM

Los Angeles Times



"[A] single giant work, strange and marvelous and impossibly funny, bursting with melancholy and horror. ... In *2666*'s fourth and longest section—'The Part About the Crimes,' it's called—Bolaño describes the discovery of each cadaver found in Santa Teresa in cold, forensic detail. It is painful to read, and difficult to put down."

BEN EHRENREICH

New York Times



"*2666* earns its place in posterity by burying a hint at the book's overall secret, to the extent that it has one, in the midst of one critic's story. Among the more piquant images, in a book that is crammed to the gills with



them, is that of a geometry text hanging on a clothesline, in a Duchamp homage." JANET MASLIN

Oregonian



"A labyrinth of stories as murky as they are brilliant, the novel weaves together plots surrounding the serial disappearances and murders of hundreds of women in central northern Mexico over the past 15 years, and the mysterious life of a fictionalized and reclusive literary figure, Benno von Archimboldi. ... *2666* is a true-crime page turner, as well as the work of one of this generation's finest authors at the height of his powers."

RICHARD MELO

San Francisco Chronicle



"[M]addening, inconclusive and very, very long; hideous in parts and beautiful in others; exerting a terrible power over the reader long after it's done. ... The novel is also a World War II epic, and a literary love triangle, and a chronicle of insanity, and the story of a washed-up African American journalist. Mostly, though, it is a novel about, and the product of, obsession."

ALEXANDER CUADROS

St. Petersburg Times



"In many ways, the novel is what a masterwork should be: epic, sprawling, massively ambitious.

But it's also messy, uneven and, for long stretches, trying, especially the book's extended set piece—a collection of journalistic reports documenting the brutal desert crimes."

VIKAS TURAKHIA

San Diego Union-Tribune



"Interesting characters are involved in obsessive projects, but he refuses to stay focused, dashing the reader's desire for resolution by substituting new characters to play at life until they also give way to others—and their lives are corrosive depictions of aesthetic and intellectual pretense. Yet Bolaño's attitude is just as much a case of intellectual pretense, concealed behind the anti-intellectual mask of cool."

NOVOA-BRUCE

CRITICAL SUMMARY

To say that *2666* is a novel is like calling a Beethoven symphony a collection of songs. If we must, though, this novel in five parts is without doubt Roberto Bolaño's masterwork, epic in scope, labyrinthine, frustrating, disjointed, maybe a bit pretentious, always somewhat aloof—and brilliant. The novel's parts are interrelated only to the extent that the author wants them to be, and his intention isn't always clear (witness the title, which has little, if any, connection to the text itself). Reading *2666* is a daunting task, though once accepted, the result might be something akin to what readers felt in 1922 when, faced for the first time with the disquieting modern vision of James Joyce, they picked up *Ulysses* and were changed by the experience. Perhaps we'll know in 657 years. ■