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Unbridled

By RACHEL NOLAN

ALMOST NEVER

By Daniel Sada

Translated by Katherine Silver

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If you read only three novelists on Mexico — and you should read many more, but that’s your affair — choose Juan Rulfo, Roberto Bolaño and Daniel Sada. Rulfo cleared the way for magic realism with “Pedro Páramo,” published in 1955, a decade before the Boom. Bolaño, a Chilean whose great subject was Mexico, asserted that realism itself was magic enough to support a novel, and his gangs of visceral realists and killers bore him out. Meanwhile Sada, who died last year, reveled in wordplay and mimicry in his Joycean celebrations of Mexico’s cowboy north.

Sada is already a cult figure among Spanish speakers. Bolaño’s appreciation of his writing (“of my generation . . . the most daring”) is splashed across the cover of the new English translation of his 2008 masterpiece, “Almost Never.” The novel concerns a 29-year-old agronomist and sex enthusiast, Demetrio Sordo, who works at an orchard on the outskirts of Oaxaca. Bored, he begins to frequent a high-class bordello, where he falls in love with a “spectacular whore” named Mireya, putting the proprietors on edge. “Such unhealthy devotion was causing universal unease at the Presunción: this was the first time in its history a client had come to sin as punctually as he went, with intrepid daily devotion, to his job.” Mireya latches on to Demetrio as an escape from the brothel, but circumstance and an uncompromising madam conspire against them. Her rate rises vertiginously.

Then, on a trip to a wedding in a dusty northern town, Demetrio meets the starchy Renata. He falls in love with her, too, and courts her through letters. It is 1945: modernity and Hiroshima try to elbow in on Demetrio’s consciousness, but he’s busy pursuing the ladies. An intractable love triangle ensues, in a satire of machismo run amok. As events force Demetrio to choose between the women, the plot takes a turn toward the outrageous. There are holdups in the red-light district and midnight flights with suitcases full of cash. There are faked pregnancies. There are uptight landladies and prostitutes who turn prints of “The Last Supper” around to face the wall before commencing their work. There is an overabundance of

sex in all forms: anxious sex, joyful sex, furtive sex, martyred masturbation.

What is so daring here? It's not Sada's depiction of the Madonna-whore complex, nor his take on the delusions of a Mexican macho — although both make for delicious burlesque. What's new is the voice, and Sada's glorious style. Katherine Silver pulls off the near-impossible feat of translating the cacophony of thoughts, interjections and slang rattling around Demetrio's fevered brain, not to mention the continual asides of an arch narrator. Here is Demetrio attempting to write his first letter to Renata: "He couldn't decide whether to write 'Highly esteemed,' 'Dear,' 'Wondrous' or simply, 'Hi, Renata,' or the name by itself, next to a drawing of a flower, using five colored pencils. No! Such vulgarity, quickly shunned. . . . Nonetheless, try, try, try again, knowing that sheer obstinacy would carry him to his goal, whatever that might be, which might provoke stentorian laughter that was nonetheless sympathetic." Demetrio's surname means "deaf," and he's fittingly oblivious. Still it's impossible not to be swept along by Sada's manic language, his Cervantean plot twists and his affection for the hero who shares his initials; and so we root for Renata's swift reply.

While "Almost Never" is the more straightforward book, the author's reputation really rests on a 1999 novel called "Porque Parece Mentira la Verdad Nunca se Sabe" ("Because It Seems a Lie the Truth Is Never Known"). Given its 650 pages, 90 characters and use of archaic metric forms like alexandrines, hendecasyllables and octosyllables, translation represents quite a hurdle. If only Katherine Silver would take it on.

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