Down the Rabbit Hole by Juan Pablo Villalobos

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Down the Rabbit Hole
Juan Pablo Villalobos
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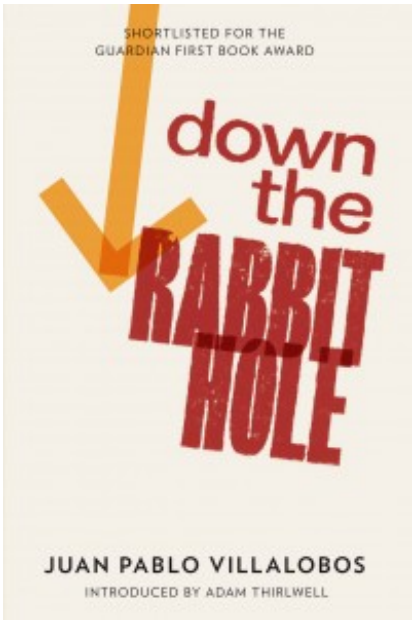

Annie McDermott

'Dead people aren't people, they're corpses'. When you live in a palace with your Mexican drug baron father and a maid who cleans bodies off the porch in the morning, it's important to be clear about things. Or at least that's what Tochtli, the child narrator of Juan Pablo Villalobos' first novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, has decided.

This is a novel about trying to make sense of things and getting it wrong. It refracts Mexico's current troubles with escalating, unpolicable drug-trafficking and violence through the eyes of its young narrator, Tochtli. His father Youcault is leader of 'the most macho gang for at least eight kilometres' and, ensconced in the family 'palace' for his own protection, he unfolds a poignant and funny study of isolation and its effects on a child and his vocabulary. Tochtli tries to keep control of his reality by means of categories. At night he reads the dictionary, and by day he classifies such experiences as increasingly violent TV news broadcasts and his father's increasing paranoia according to the words he collects: 'sordid, disastrous, immaculate, pathetic and devastating'.

First published in Spain in 2010, *Down the Rabbit Hole* has reached the English-speaking world thanks to the refreshing new publishers And Other Stories, a non-profit company that prints titles suggested by its group of subscribers and aims to carry its readers to unexpected new places — places often too new and unexpected for publishing houses more concerned about profit margins to risk.

Tochtli and his father Yolcaut's palace is a place at once both expected and unexpected. This miniature novel does not aim to present a detailed portrait of the narcotrafficking life – and indeed a visit to any Mexican bookshop reveals no shortage of works that do. Instead, it paints its scene with a few bold strokes, in the form of instantly-recognisable narcoclichés: from the caged big cats in the garden to the corrupt politicians and visiting American 'business partner' who arrives complete with toupée and cocaine habit, Yolcaut is on the whole a highly conventional drug lord. Yet the simplicity of the backdrop allows the novel's extraordinary protagonist to take centre-stage — Tochtli's voice is what makes the novel such a brilliantly unexpected treatment of its world.

Totchtli is an earnest narrator, keen to tell the truth and even keener to use the correct terminology when he does so. '[S]evered heads have gone out of fashion. Now it's more human remains that they show on TV. [...] It can be anything apart from heads and hands. That's what makes them human remains and not corpses.'

This is how he makes his world manageable — through a framework of categories that recalls the children's toy with wooden shapes that fit through the correct holes in the lid of a box.

But Tochtli's tragedy is that not one of the linguistic categories he uses to make sense of this twisted, claustrophobic wonderland is his own. 'What I definitely am is macho,' he tells us — but in the macho/faggot divide, applied by Tochtli to almost everyone he meets (or, more often, watches on TV), we feel the weight of Yolcaut's jewel-encrusted hand.

'The other day a man I didn't know came to our palace and Yolcaut wanted to know if I was macho or not. The man's face was covered in blood [...]. But I didn't say anything, because being macho means you're not scared and if you are scared you're a faggot. I stood there very solemnly while Mitzi and Chichilkuali, who are the guards in our palace, gave him some devastating blows. The man turned out to be a faggot because he started to scream [...]. The good thing is that I did turn out to be macho and Yolcaut let me go

before they turned the faggot into a corpse.'

This is language being used to label and not to describe, as every set of devastating blows reported by an apparently undevastated Tochtli reminds us. Behaving in this way, language can insulate and exclude: only the bricks that fit the holes make it into the box, and other objects escape unconsidered. We never know how happy Tochtli is. We know how he feels about his hat collection, about Samurai (macho) and charro cowboys (not macho enough), but never how he feels about his father's business, or his father, or his life.

And so his own carefully-collected words do not work for his own pain. His semi-constant stomach-ache, once diagnosed as a psychosomatic consequence of a motherless childhood by a doctor asked politely by Yolcaut not to return, is neither devastating, pathetic nor sordid: 'It's a sharp stab that feels like you're being electrocuted. Once I stuck a fork in an electric socket and electrocuted my hand a little bit. The stabbing is the same, but in my stomach.' 'Normally they're like cramps, although the worst ones feel like a hole that keeps growing and growing and it's as if my tummy's going to explode.' With personal, direct physical discomfort, his concern for the truth forces him into similes taken from the world and not its dictionaries.

Fortunately, despite spending his time categorising his hat collection (safari hats are 'like detective hats, which are good for doing investigations, but specialised in animals') and researching Liberian pygmy hippopotami, Totchli manages to escape being twee, or quirky, or cute.

This is because Villalobos knows that the power of child narrators lies beyond their capacity to shock us with casual sadism — 'At the moment we're studying the conquest of Mexico. It's a fun topic, with war and blood and dead people' — or embarrass us with their acceptance — '…the land of liberty, fraternity and equality. Apparently the reason you cut off kings' heads is to have those things'. Only in its very rare (in fact, just these two) weaker moments does Tochtli's narrative fall back on those too-easy ways of affecting the reader. Normally, he goes beyond into what all the best child narrators do best: logic.

'The most normal thing to do is cut off the head, although, actually, you can cut anything. It's because of the neck. If we didn't have a neck it would be different. It might be normal to cut bodies in half down the middle so as to have two corpses. But we have a neck and this is a really big temptation. Especially for French people.'

Villalobos has said that he wanted to write a book without moralisations about a subject which has been moralised far too much. He achieves this through the wide-eyed ruthless reports of his protagonist, whose only ethical conviction is that you have to tell the truth. When other people moralise about Yolcaut's business, their judgments enter hand-in-hand with hypocrisy: 'I had fun listening to Yolcaut and the Governor talking. But the Governor didn't. His face was all red, as if it was going to explode, because I was eating some quesadillas while they had green pozole and talked about their cocaine business.'

Rosalind Harvey's impressive translation retains the brilliant comic timing of the original – the combination of a peaceful snack of quesadillas with the chat over drug deals here, for example, and the unfazed relation of the politician's subsequent reappearance when, along with the President, he 'went on TV to tell all us Mexicans not to worry, to stay calm'.

Down the Rabbit Hole is about power, powerlessness and isolation, which childhood is also about, which crime is also about. Tochtli's deadpan and diligent acceptance of his seemingly unacceptable reality is tragic without being sentimental, and with suffocating control over his protagonist's words, Villalobos has created a completely original portrait of someone with absolutely no control at all — and an immaculate and devastating novel.

Signed copies of *Down the Rabbit Hole* are available at Dulwich Books

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