Through a Mexican looking glass

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IN THE MIDDLE of Juan Pablo Villalobos debut novel, there's a joke about the Mexican police, who are searching for a rabbit. They march a suspect – a hippopotamus – off to a remote spot for questioning. When the hippo returns after being interrogated, he confesses that he's a rabbit.

As a set-piece, it juxtaposes police brutality with anthropomorphic cuteness and illustrates a dark theme using an innocent creature. This looks like literary sleight-of-hand, but is actually a microcosm of Villalobos' brilliant *Down the Rabbit Hole* .

Initially, the book shapes itself into a pithy novella-esque work of "narco-literatura", but it also reveals itself to be a boyhood story of coming to terms with the world around you.

"I wanted to write about drug gangs, but I wanted it to be more than that," says Villalobos as we sip tea in a noisy cafe. "What's going on in Mexico every day is really dark and it's something everybody talks about constantly. Everyone is connected to it. You have conversations where someone tells you about something that happened to a friend, or a neighbour who disappeared. It used to just happen in certain areas, but now it is everywhere, and in all the cities."

"It" refers to Mexico's drug problems, which thrives on narco-economics, corruption and political pay-offs. Instead of telling the story through a gang member, Villalobos chooses a young boy – Totchli, son of a drug lord – as his mouthpiece. The book's title suggests a parallel with Lewis Carroll's Alice, another precocious child in an odd world, and Villalobos acknowledges both a subliminal debt and a touch of serendipitous translation.

"It's interesting because the title means something completely different in Spanish. My publishers pointed out the link to *Alice in Wonderland* , which is a book I love. It got me thinking that Totchli is also a child who finds himself in a strange place trying to deal with what is happening around him."

Bolshy playing cards and Cheshire cats are the least of Totchli's worries; his environs are far more dangerous. His father is a local drug bigshot, and while the boy wants for nothing – including an education – his life is one of confinement, where he is rarely allowed outside.

"He uses his imagination to go places," says Villalobos, "which is why he loves books and knowledge." The writer confesses that this aspect of the novel is a nod to his own youth. "I read Sartre, Camus, Joyce. I was messed up (laughs) but I do love Joyce. Not so much *Ulysses* , but *A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man* had such an effect on me."

Unsurprisingly, there are modernist tics in the book. Totchli, for all his learning, obsessively uses the same recurring words to describe things ("sordid", "pathetic") and a similar economy extends to characters, setting and the book itself. "It's definitely a stylistic nod for me. When I read books, I'm not that interested in the plot, it's always about the language."

Totchli is schooled by a tutor while is father surrounds himself with henchmen and hookers. Some of the guards are mute, and the women in the book – a cleaner and prostitute among them – are similarly voiceless in a society that reveres the matriarch. Totchli has no mother, and refers frequently to stomach illnesses. His father calls in a psychologist who concludes that there is something wrong with Totchli's "psychology, not his tummy" – hardly surprising, given his motherless situation, his isolation and his exposure to violence.

Interestingly, this violence is not something the boy witnesses first hand. It enters his world via television and scenes from history in the books he reads. This, says Villalobos, was very deliberate.

“By using a young person’s voice, and humour, it allowed me to comment on a very dark subject. So you get Totchli talking about how much he loves Samurai films, or his fascination with how the French used to cut off the heads of kings and queens. It’s my way of talking about something – violence – that’s dark and endemic in Mexico.”

Villalobos is at the tale end of a hectic publicity schedule. He is due to fly back to Brazil, where he lives with his family and admits to hugely missing his children, who are two and five.

“This book is actually dedicated to my son, and it might seem strange to dedicate a book to a five-year-old about drugs and gangs, but I wanted him to know about Mexico. It’s the country of his heritage, but we don’t live there, and I wanted him to know about it, good and bad. My next book is just as political and for the same reason will be dedicated to my daughter”.

I ask Villalobos about something he said recently – that if he’d written this book 20 years ago, Totchli would have been the son of a politician, not a drug lord. “In Mexico 20 years ago it was the politicians who were corrupt and in charge, but now it seems that even they’ve been overtaken by the drug lords. Some of the richest people in the world live in Mexico.” And they make their money from drugs? He shrugs ambiguously and smiles, as if he’s reluctant to mention names.

Down the Rabbit Hole was picked up by independent publisher And Other Stories. The non-profit co-op offers readers a say in what it publishes and a “thank-you” credit in a numbered edition in return for subscriptions. The book was recommended by Villalobos’s translator and was recently shortlisted for the Guardian First Book Award. Villalobos is modest, but admits to being pleasantly surprised by its success.

“I’m published in Spain by the same publisher as Roberto Bolaño, so being published this way is quite different. If you had asked me a couple of years where the book would be successful, I would have said the UK, because I think there is a shared love of dark humour.”

It’s difficult to understate what a unique character Totchli is, and he provides many of the book’s laughs (which are not always very PC). A recurring sub-plot is that the boy who has everything longs for a Liberian Pygmy Hippopotamus. Not surprising for a child born into a money-can- buy-anything narco-world. “The pygmy hippos are a bit of a fetish of mine,” laughs Villalobos, “but as well as wanting them as something to love, as an object, Totchli is fascinated by their endangered status. He wants one because they’re so rare.”

Villalobos’s native tongue litters the book, and a glossary at the back includes many references to food. “Food is really central to my culture and my next book – about a family, and politics – is actually called after a Mexican national dish”. If the new book garners anything like the reviews for *Down the Rabbit Hole* , we’ll be hearing a lot more about Juan Pablo Villalobos.

Down the Rabbit Hole is published by And Other Stories. andotherstories.org