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BOOKS

The Twins Ran Off? Can I Have Their Share?

'Quesadillas,' by Juan Pablo Villalobos

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By DWIGHT GARNER

When I was an editor at The New York Times Book Review not so long ago, we usually discouraged reviewers from mentioning the prizes an author had won, unless those prizes were ambrosial — the National Book Award, the Man Booker, the Yale Series of Younger Poets and so on.

The reason was that there are so many prizes; they're what the book world doles out in lieu of money. They can be baffling. "Honey, this one's won the Francis Flatulaugh Award for Oblique Heartbreak. What do you think?"

I mention this as a sort of pre-emptive apology for reporting that "Down the Rabbit Hole," the first novel from the young Mexican writer Juan Pablo Villalobos, was shortlisted in 2011 for the Guardian First Book Award. That's a relatively modest prize, as these things go. And it didn't even win.

But it wasn't just the shortlisting. A posse of Britain's most interesting critics rallied in support of the novel in their reviews, taking turns whacking it up into the air as if they were the batsmen on a mighty cricket team.

I've since read "Down the Rabbit Hole" (it's about Mexico's drug wars, as seen from the perspective of a narco-lord's mischievous young son), as well as Mr. Villalobos's second and new novel, "Quesadillas." I'm chuffed, as they would say in London, to report that the buzz is right on.

Both of Mr. Villalobos's novels are short, dark, comic, ribald and surreal. They aren't so much manic-depressive as they are, to borrow Delmore Schwartz's phrasing, manic-impressive. This writer stares down serious issues — poverty, class, systemic violence — and doesn't analyze them so much as sneeze all over them.

The narrator-hero of "Quesadillas" is Orestes, sometimes called Oreo, who lives with his parents and six siblings in a shoddy house — "like a shoe box with a lid made from a sheet of asbestos" — on a hill whose name translates roughly as "armpit of the universe."

His father, a schoolteacher, is a master of the bitter and unprintable insult. (His denunciations made me recall the title of an old Fairport Convention album, "Expletive Delighted!") His stolid mother tends her griddle, dishing out quesadillas for her brood. There are never enough to go around.

A household phase of tortilla rationing leads, Orestes says, "to the political radicalization of every member of my family." The family invents new names for its sad meals. There are "inflationary quesadillas, normal quesadillas, devaluation quesadillas and poor man's quesadillas — listed in order of greatest affluence to greatest parsimony."

In a poor man's quesadilla, we learn, in a Shteyngartian detail, "the presence of cheese was literary: you opened one up and instead of adding melted cheese my mother had written the word 'cheese' on the surface of the tortilla."

From this opening, things get weird pretty quickly. Some wealthy neighbors build a house nearby. That family's patriarch inseminates cows for a living, so we get to learn about movies with titles like "Masters of Semen."

A political revolution commences right down in the valley. Two of Orestes' younger siblings, twins, vanish from a supermarket. Are aliens involved? Maybe. A magic pen to control epileptic seizures appears, one that can control television sets in rowdy bars. A road trip occurs. A stoner uncle named Pink Floyd wanders onto the set.

It's all delicious, and resonant. It's as if Mr. Villalobos, aware of his country's Surrealist artistic traditions, had also plugged himself into this line from "Junky," the William S. Burroughs novel: "In Mexico your wishes have a dream power. When you want to see someone, he turns up."

The person we want to see is Orestes. His voice is consistently winning. He learns to tell his look-alike siblings apart based on "the stains on our teeth." He describes a police officer's scalp this way: "He had a great deal of hair on his head, different kinds of hair: straight, frizzy, wavy, curly; there were even several degrees of curls. You had the impression that up there, among such capillary chaos, his ideas were getting tangled up."

The comedy in "Quesadillas" has a moral dimension. Conquered people,

Saul Bellow told us, tend to be witty. So do long-oppressed people. Dreaming about America, Orestes thinks mostly about recycling bins and what they must mean. "A bin for banana skins," he thinks, in a reverie that could almost be out of Sondheim. "A bin for red fizzy drinks cans. A bin for Kentucky Fried Chicken bones."

Orestes is a great noticer of things, especially when they concern his stomach. "Telling the poor and the middle classes apart might be an esoteric riddle," he thinks, "but it was the wealthy who were really easy to spot: they ate cakes imported from the lowlands."

He is funny about debt. When Orestes owes his father a large sum of money, he declares, "All I had to do was wait a couple of weeks for the currency to be devalued 8,000 percent and then I'd pay him back." He remarks, "The worst thing wasn't being poor; the worst thing was having no idea of the things you can do when you have money."

I'd like to see a bit more texture in Mr. Villalobos's fiction; I'd like a bit more complicated human interplay. His first two books are basically novellas, and I'd like to see him stretch in all sorts of ways. But I'll happily settle for his fiction world as it stands right now, which Orestes pretty well sums up: "Why pay for a psychoanalyst when you have a stoner uncle?"

QUESADILLAS

By Juan Pablo Villalobos

Translated by Rosalind Harvey

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