



Book review: Quesadillas, By Juan Pablo Villalobos

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In his acclaimed debut novel, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, Juan Pablo Villalobos explored the lawlessness and violence of Mexico as seen through the eyes of the young son of a drug baron. In *Quesadillas*, Villalobos travels back to the 1980s and again uses a child's perspective to describe the corruption and economic volatility of his native country.

The 13-year-old Orestes lives on the Cerro de la Chingado – which Rosalind Harvey translates as "the hill in the middle of (fucking) nowhere" – in the Mexican state of Jalisco. The town has "more cars than people, more charro horsemen than horses, more priests than cows, and the people like to believe in the existence of ghosts, miracles, spaceships, saints and so forth."

From a large family and always hungry, Orestes measures poverty in quesadillas. He and his six siblings have been named after figures from classical Greece by their high-school teacher father. As well as pondering their varying degrees of poverty and the merits of being considered middle-class, Orestes's particular talent is poetry – reciting and writing – although he finds little opportunity to be taken seriously.

The town hall is occupied by rebels and during the unrest Orestes loses his younger twin brothers in the state-owned supermarket. Then a wealthy Polish family move into a palatial house next door. They are intent on developing the surrounding land, which threatens Orestes' family home.

Villalobos manages to pack in various political references. The twins' apparent abduction and the ineffectual police investigation recall the disappearances that occur with impunity in Mexico. When the tragedy is reported on television, it is treated like a telenovela soap opera before the presenter returns "to other news without a solution, such as the national economy".

Quesadillas is gloriously absurd, celebrates the fantastical, and plays with notions of magic realism. But it is Villalobos's quirky, laconic style that most impresses and marks him out as a writer of distinction.