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Quesadillas by Juan Pablo Villalobos – review

Villalobos employs another convincing child narrator for his satirical take on poverty and corruption in Mexico

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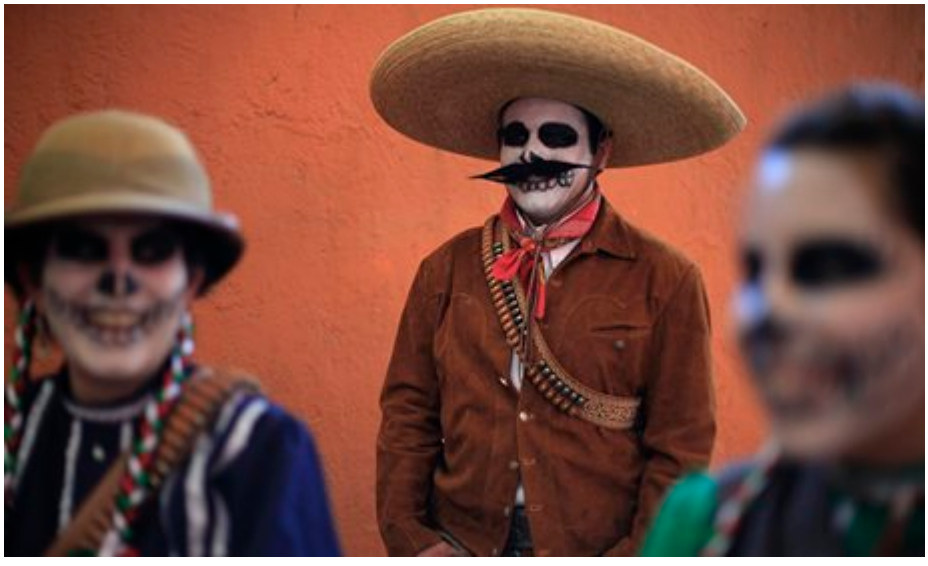
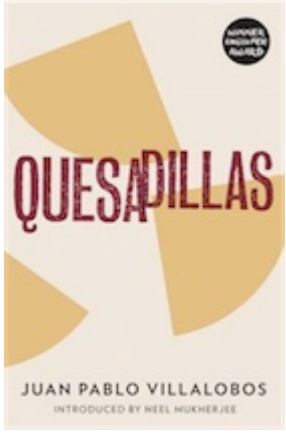


Surreal McCoy ... women dressed as *escaramuzas*, also known as cowgirls, and a charro horseman in Mexico City, 2010. Photograph: Eliana Aponte/Reuters

André Breton declared Mexico to be "a surrealist country". The observation was something of a backhanded compliment – the French artist was fed up because the organisers of the conference he was attending had failed to pick him up from the airport. Yet Juan Pablo Villalobos's second novel seems to bear this out: "Weren't fantastic, wonderful things meant to happen to us all the time? Didn't we speak to the dead? Wasn't everyone always saying we were a surrealist country?"

Quesadillas
by Juan Pablo Villalobos

There's no shortage of surrealism in Villalobos's world. The climax of the book is an orgiastic dream vision featuring copulating cattle, flying tortillas and an alien invasion, which piles absurdity upon improbability with gleeful abandon. Yet the book is as much a coruscating parody of Mexican culture as Villalobos's debut, *Down the Rabbit Hole*,



for the 2011 Guardian first book award.

Quesadillas, translated by Rosalind Harvey, does for magic realism what *Down the Rabbit Hole* did for "narco-literature" – the popular South American genre of drugs, gangs and guns. That first book was a short, shocking exercise in sophisticated pulp, in which the violence of contemporary Mexican society was filtered through the limited comprehension of Tochtli, the prepubescent son of a narcotics baron. While Tochtli claimed to know "thirteen or fourteen people" in total, the teenage narrator of *Quesadillas* has almost as many brothers and sisters, and faces the rather more common experience of bumping along the poverty line.

Orestes, named after the Greek hero but known as Oreo, like the biscuit, is the second eldest of a clan idealistically named by their classics-teacher father: "Aristotle, Archilochus, Callimachus, Electra ... we were more like the index of an encyclopaedia than a family." There's so many of them that when the twins Castor and Pollux go missing, Orestes treats their disappearance less as a matter of concern than a cause for celebration that there will be more food to go round.

The proximity of starvation, constant even within a family theoretically belonging to the professional classes, is calculated by Orestes according to an economic formula that might be known as the quesadilla index: "We were all aware of the roller-coaster that was the national economy due to the fluctuating thickness of the quesadillas my mother served at home. We'd even invented categories – inflationary quesadillas, normal quesadillas, devaluation quesadillas ..." At the very bottom of the pile come the dreaded "poor man's quesadillas", in which "the presence of cheese was literary: you opened one and instead of adding melted cheese my mother had written the word 'cheese' on the surface of the tortilla".

The high-keyed domestic comedy is enjoyable for its own sake, but provides cover for a satirical assault on the mendacity of Mexican politics. Villalobos sets the action at the beginning of the 1980s, a period of rampant inflation and devaluation of the peso, and ends in 1988, when the notoriously corrupt Carlos Salinas became president amid suspicions of election fraud. By telling the story in retrospect, Villalobos endows Orestes with a credible combination of insight and ignorance. He admits that he would have a more secure grasp of the country's malaise "if it weren't for the fact I was living through that period of supreme selfishness known as adolescence". At the same time he is capable of such astute, adult reflections as the notion that Mexico's problems stem from the 1920s, "when the government decided that the things in heaven belonged to heaven and the things on earth belonged to the government".

He is in many respects an even more impressive creation than the bookishly unworldly preteen persona Villalobos sustained throughout *Down the Rabbit Hole*. The 1980s setting of *Quesadillas* is as retro as a Rubik's cube, but it draws attention to the fact that Salinas's Institutional Revolutionary party actually returned to power in 2012.

And though it is always dangerous to hunt for autobiographical reasons for a novel's success, it cannot be wholly coincidental that the town in which Orestes lives, Lagos de Moreno, happens to be where Villalobos was himself brought up: "a place where there are more cows 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". Breton may have been right to observe that Mexico is a surrealist country. Villalobos suggests that it's nothing to be proud of.