The late Rafael Chirbes explored themes of death and money in On the Edge. Daniel Reinhardt / Corbis

Book review: On the Edge is a morbidly inviting tale of lost lives and loves

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January 27, 2016 *Updated: January 28, 2016 11:30 AM*

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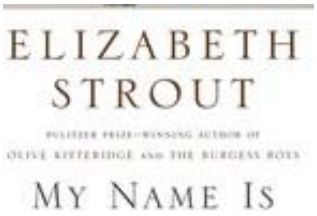

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On the Edge is the first novel by the Spanish writer Rafael Chirbes to appear in English. As befits an award-winning writer, the book has an award-winning translator – Margaret Jull Costa.

Sadly, Chirbes did not live long enough to appreciate Jull Costa's efforts or be feted by Anglophone readers and critics: he died last year at the age of 66. But if this intense and incisive novel is any indication of Chirbes's greatness then it is surely only a matter of time before we get more of his back catalogue in English and hear Roberto Bolaño-esque posthumous acclaim.

The novel benefits from a short but truly arresting opening section. Ahmed is a jobless Moroccan immigrant trying to stay afloat in the Spanish town of Olba. The economic crisis has taken hold: banks have gone bust, unemployment stands at 20 per cent and Ahmed and others like him make do on benefits.

When he tells a friend he is seeking work he is laughed at. "Work? Only if you want a job digging graves for suicides." One day, while out fishing at a nearby lagoon, Ahmed notices two dogs fighting over a lump of meat, which on closer inspection turns out to be a gnawed, putrescent human hand. His horror is compounded on spotting three mutilated bodies in the muddy water and a burnt-out car in the undergrowth.

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Having imprinted these images on the reader's mind, Chirbes leaves Ahmed and starts his main section of the book which takes the form of a series of long, meandering monologues.

His speaker is Esteban, another Olba resident, and Ahmed's previous employer. His raw, caustic and occasionally cryptic rants reveal, in instalments, the many trials and upheavals that have shaped and scarred him.

We hear of family strife and subsequent rifts, the country's civil war and his relatives' dark pasts.

However, there has been more recent turmoil. The family carpentry business has gone to the wall. A dodgy acquaintance has vanished with Esteban's investments – "my account with the savings bank is no longer an account but a black hole".

He lays off workers, some of whom were employed illegally, and spends evenings in Bar Castañer moaning and philosophising about money while losing more of it in card games and domino matches.

When he isn't half-heartedly caring for his 90-year-old dementia-addled father he is making mechanical trips to the Lovely Ladies Club, hunting small game on the "putrid, life-giving" marsh, or replaying fond conversations with his father's former nurse Liliana.

Esteban's free-flowing tormented thoughts and painful memories are regularly intercut with other, italicised disquisitions from unnamed narrators, each of them different victims of the financial crash.

One of them is a refuse collector who is coaxed by his boss into being a road sweeper: "a better job, they said, cleaner, more gentlemanly, ballroom dancing with a broom: that's what they tried to fob us off with".

The book's voices are either blunt and tinged with despair or bitter and drenched with bile. Esteban bewails his money troubles, his decaying body and his demanding father. Human behaviour is "neither exemplary nor encouraging"; human life is "nature's biggest waste of time and energy".

Gripes are spun out for maximum effect: "Lagoons don't get a very good press: fever, malaria, filth"; one gambling friend is "The slave-driver, the gang-master, the exploiter of the workforce."

All of which sounds forbidding. And yet the novel's bleak or seamy settings are morbidly inviting, and its narrator's sour and cynical discourses have a mesmerising, incantatory power. Even Chirbes's two main unsavoury themes – death and money – are explored in fascinating ways.

Esteban gets over the loss of his savings and becomes ambivalent about money, seeing it as either inconsequential ("Money doesn't matter") or beneficial (able to "bring together so many apparently incompatible lives"). Death (or as Esteban calls it, "definite disappearance") also arouses different feelings, depending on whether Esteban is dilating on declining industry, dying patriarchs, hunted animals or moribund prospects.

Early on, Esteban makes reference to Ahmed's grim discovery: "If you throw a corpse into the sea, you're doing the environment a favour."

We read on, in thrall to this mordant voice, anxious to see just how far one man has sunk and the lengths he will go to get out of his rut.

Malcolm Forbes is a freelance writer based in Edinburgh.