



Book Review: *I Don't Expect Anyone to Believe Me* by Juan Pablo Villalobos. Jayne Marshall
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***I Don't Expect Anyone to Believe Me* by Juan Pablo Villalobos (And Other Stories,
Sheffield, 2020).
Reviewed by Jayne Marshall**

This is a very funny novel. Once, that is, one has defined what funny is, as well as what a novel is. Welcome to the multi-layered, meta-world of Juan Pablo Villalobos. Not Juan Pablo Villalobos the author that is, but the protagonist of the novel with the same name, who – like the author – travelled to Europe to write a doctoral thesis about the limits of humour in Latin American literature of the twentieth century. Are you laughing yet?

The book intertwines its themes and genres, meshes, mushes; turns itself inside out. It is an impressive mix of fiction, auto-fiction and parody, told via four different narrators, and a plot of pure gangsta action. That action takes the reader from Mexico, where Juan Pablo gets accidentally involved in the machinations of an international organised crime ring, to Barcelona where he is meant to be living quietly with his girlfriend Valentina and studying at the Universitat Autònoma. To put it another way - and acting as a kind of mission statement for the book itself - Juan Pablo (the protagonist) frames it thus:

“If literature has taught me anything it’s that in order to attain something that seems impossible (or fantastic, absurd, marvelous, magical) you need only fulfil a series of requirements that are not themselves, deep down, all that difficult. At worse, you have to create a new world with different rules for operating. At best, you just need to respect a narrative logic.” (75)

Villalobos has defined this novel as a parody of autobiographical literature and the acute level of self-referentiality that it involves may not be to everyone’s taste. However, what

saves it from being too self-aware is just how funny it really is. The idea that Juan Pablo is studying humour in such minute detail is something that in itself would seem to remove all hilarity from the topic, as Jonathan Silvertown, author of *The Comedy of Error*, commented in an episode of BBC Radio 4's *Start the Week* (2020): "Nothing kills humour as much as analysing it.", but conversely, there is also much cerebration and preparation behind a good joke, which is certainly the case with this novel. A scene where Juan Pablo is forced by his mafia boss to murder a private detective illustrates this. The scene lasts for 11 pages and is constructed around the telling of a joke, which Juan Pablo narrates, referring to himself in the third person as "the Mexican". It starts with Juan Pablo's boss (called "the lawyer") setting out the severity of the situation: "... so you can be sure I'm not laughing, so you can see the difference, I'll tell you a joke" (93). The "joke" that follows, is the lawyer's summation of how useless Juan Pablo is as a mafioso and just how serious he should be taking his duties if he does not want to end up dead. The mid-point of the scene has Juan Pablo dissecting the joke and analysing its potential: "[the Mexican is] confused because the joke's getting too complicated (there's a Mexican, a Chinaman, a Muslim who isn't really a Muslim, but a Pakistani atheist, a Spanish detective, a Mexican mafioso and his hired thug ... too many characters, this joke can't end well)" (95). Perhaps, my writing a summary of Villalobos' examination of a joke via his protagonist (with the same name) who is telling it in the third person, all framed around a murder, does not sound all that funny. Therefore, I will leave the last words (and the end of the scene) to the lawyer himself: "'End of joke', says the Mexican mafioso. You can all laugh now. Nobody laughs. He said you can all laugh, *man*, says the dandy. That's a fucking order" (97-98).

Villalobos has also described the book as "self-parody", which adds another strand to the theme of humour, at the same time as saving it from being too cerebral. Villalobos studied autobiographical fiction as an academic and uses his knowledge of the genre to take pops at himself. The character of Iván, a doctoral student studying with Juan Pablo, is used to posit the hypothesis that whether something is funny or not depends on who is telling the joke (and also that person's sense of superiority over the butt of that joke). He says: "[Baudelaire said] that the only person able to laugh at his own falling-over is a philosopher. Who is in the habit of splitting himself in two and of, open quote, witnessing in a disinterested fashion the

phenomenon of his ego” (44). A rather dry way to lay claim to having a good sense of humour. Iván’s speech is later described as a “disquisition”, which could be read as Villalobos commenting on the novel itself, in its role as auto-fiction parody, and perhaps on writing and writers more widely.

Something else that is meant to kill a joke is repetition - the overworking of an angle. In the translator’s note at the end of the book, Daniel Hahn writes: “*Fuck* and variants thereof appear a glorious 269 times in my translation ... *dickhead* 63 times ... [and] an impressive 100 *assholes*” (256). The sheer quantity of swearing alone is impressive, and the range and the creativity with which it is employed is very funny. The character of Facundo is as finely drawn as they come and there is true artistry in his analysis of enthusiastic newcomers to Barcelona:

“But I was going to tell you about the Colombians, a couple of shitheads the size of the Barça stadium, saying these totally shitheadish things the whole time about how beautiful Barcelona was, the shitheads used to make themselves sandwiches and sit in front of Gaudí houses to eat them, seriously such total shitheads those shitheads.”
(48)

As Villalobos has said himself in a recent interview hosted by McNally Jackson (2020): “If you don’t do something with language you are not doing literature. Literature is about language.” His use of the trashy is genuinely innovative.

Swearing also provides an important linguistic function for Villalobos. There are a proliferation of ‘Spanishes’ in the book, ranging through Mexico and Argentina to code-switching Catalans, and Italian and Portuguese-tinged Spanish. Each character, and each speaker of a different Spanish, has their own set of beloved expletives, which serves to give voice to the chorus that is the Spanish language, whilst at the same time finding a way for them to harmonise rather than create discord or inauthenticity. In the 2020 interview, Villalobos stated that Roberto Bolaño was a subtle, yet important, influence on the book, as he gave those writers who live outside of their home country (as Villalobos does) a “linguistic place” to write from, making it acceptable to span countries and languages, rather than searching for a single voice. Swearing is one way that Villalobos creates that linguistic place in

the novel. Rather than trying to assimilate all those voices into one ‘non-specific demonic’, Villalobos has chosen to celebrate them and let them run riot (a bittersweet challenge for his translator, Hahn).

As an immigrant in Spain myself, I found unlikely parallels between Juan Pablo’s situation and my own. Whilst in my case there has certainly been less mafia-action, it remains true that – whatever the circumstances - uprooting yourself is a bewildering experience, something that Juan Pablo and I (and all immigrants) share. Just as Juan Pablo found that with the lawyer, there were procedures that made no sense and were not explained (but were expected to be followed all the same), so it is with the state and bureaucracy. Similarly, with the culture of a place - there are behaviours and social reference points that make little sense to the outsider; this lack of understanding in itself clearly marks us out as other. With a novel that ranges through some dark places, perhaps Villalobos is right, and the best lens through which to view the world - in all its light and shade - is a humorous one. *A malos tiempos buena cara*, as they say in Spain.

Works Cited

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Jayne Marshall

Jayne Marshall is a fiction and narrative non-fiction writer who holds an MSt in Creative Writing, with distinction, from the University of Oxford. She has been published in magazines and anthologies in the UK, USA, Australia, India and Spain. Jayne is originally from the UK but currently lives in Madrid.