
35Muertos [35Dead]

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35Muertos is a sprawling, fast-paced novel set in Colombia's recent past and dealing with the country's history of an epidemic of violence. Written in a lively prose full of references to salsa and bolero music, it is told mainly from the point of view of the hapless, naïve and nameless protagonist, who practically floats through life, getting involved in a multitude of questionable activities (from petty thievery to drug dealing, guerrilla activities to being a corrupt soldier, a paramilitary and a paid thug). Never quite able to control himself, whether in terms of obeying the various shady characters he works for or reining in his sexual impulses, he exemplifies how easy it is for a normal Colombian to get sucked into a life of crime and violence and be blinded by the money and status this life all too often brings.

Covering the period from 1965–1999 and moving between Bogotá and other Colombian cities and towns, the book follows the protagonist's life from birth to adulthood. The main character is addressed mainly *aspelao* (roughly equivalent to 'kid'), and as well as his voice, several other characters tell their stories, including his aunt, girlfriends, and a few characters who make one appearance before disappearing for ever from the narrative. One particularly chilling chapter involves a stoned artist who is approached by a mafia boss and asked to produce a painting of the eye of the first man the mafioso killed, a photo of which he carries around in his wallet as a 'good-luck charm.'

Each short chapter (between 1 and 6 or 7 pages) is headed with a few words from boleros and salsa songs; the pace is quite fast, and the book is very readable. In terms of an English readership, I think anyone who enjoys García Márquez would like it. There's a good deal of slang and street-talk, but this is not necessarily an issue, and I think that many words could be kept in Spanish in the translation. It certainly adds to the feel of the novel and the identity of the characters.

At one point, one of the protagonist's friends laments at how the kid 'got to be old without realising how this country works'. 'And how does it work?' replies the kid. 'By killing people, brother: in this country if you haven't killed anyone or ordered a man to kill someone then you don't progress', and it's this sad message that the pathetic but ultimately likeable anti-hero impresses upon us most strongly, although unfortunately for him, by this point it's too late.

This is a summary of the report by **Rosalind Harvey**

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