

## Roberto Bolaño and *The Skating Rink*

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Although Roberto Bolaño spent more than half of his life in Spain, when asked to choose a label for himself, he opted for 'Latin American writer'. Born in Santiago de Chile in 1953, he moved with his family to Mexico City in 1968. Soon afterwards, he stopped attending high school and entered a phase of formative truancy, spending his days reading, writing poetry and frequenting the bohemian haunts memorialised in his first long novel, *The Savage Detectives*. In 1973, he decided to return to Chile, on his own, to support Salvador Allende's embattled Unidad Popular government. Travelling overland through Central America, he arrived in Chile shortly before the military coup that darkened an earlier eleventh of September. He was briefly imprisoned in Concepción, and returned to Mexico in January 1974, after his release.

Back in Mexico City, Bolaño founded a poetic movement called the *infrealistas* with his friend Mario Santiago Papasquiaro. Faithful to the tradition of the European avant-gardes, the *infrealistas* were infamous troublemakers, disrupting cultural events by heckling and creating scandals. *The Savage Detectives* fictionalises the life of the group and its slow, sad break-up.

In 1977, Bolaño left Mexico for Europe. He lived first in Barcelona, then in Girona, and from 1985 in Blanes, on the Costa Brava. His archive shows that he was working seriously on novels and stories from the time of his arrival in Spain, but it was not until 1996 that he was taken on by a major publisher. During that span of almost twenty years, he had a series of casual jobs, working as a nightwatchman in a camping ground (like Gaspar Heredia in *The Skating Rink*) and a jewellery salesman (like Remo Morán, Gaspar's employer). He also supplemented his income by entering his work in the solidly endowed but obscure literary competitions organised by various municipalities in Spain, as recounted in his story 'Sensini' (in *Last Evenings on Earth*).

The turning point in Bolaño's public life as a writer came in 1998, when he published *Los detectives salvajes* (*The Savage Detectives*), which won the Premio Herralde in Spain and the Premio Rómulo Gallegos in Venezuela. The second of these, in particular, is a mark of consecration in the Hispanic literary world, and it had been won, before Bolaño, by Mario Vargas Llosa, Gabriel García Márquez, Carlos Fuentes and Javier Marías.

When Bolaño died in 2003, he had not quite finished his 'meganovel' *2666*. This is a deeply bewildering and distressing book – a long part of it deals in forensic detail with the serial murders of more than a hundred young women in the fictional city of Santa Teresa on the Mexico-US border – but the imaginative power of its engagement with our new global disorders has been saluted with enthusiasm around the world.

In 1992, Bolaño won the City of Alcalá de Henares Prize for Fiction with *La pista de hielo* (*The Skating Rink*). It was a year of good and bad news: as well as a number of windfall prizes, it brought the diagnosis of a degenerative liver disease. From that point on, Bolaño knew that he was living and writing on borrowed time. Working steadily, in a little over ten years, he produced a body of fiction that is remarkable for its inventiveness as well as its sheer abundance.

*The Skating Rink* belongs to the beginning of this phase, but a number of Bolaño's trademarks are already apparent: the bursts of wild figurative language interrupting more straightforward narrative prose; the choral alternation of voices (prefiguring the central section of *The Savage Detectives*); and the structuring role played by a crime and the subsequent investigation. In later books, Bolaño would most often leave the crime unsolved. In *The Skating Rink*, the official investigation fails but the criminal is identified, and the crime serves as a clasp to fasten three contrasting love stories.

When the bumptious bureaucrat Enric Rosquelles meets the beautiful figure skater Nuria Martí in the town of Z on the Costa Brava, his personal empire-building is derailed and he lays all his power and

know-how at her feet, using public funds to construct a skating rink in the basement of an abandoned mansion belonging to the municipality, so that she can train in her home town and regain her place on the Olympic team. While Enric is a comic character, there is a grandeur to this professional suicide.

When Gaspar Heredia, a young Mexican immigrant, falls in love with the remote and empty-eyed Caridad, who has been expelled from the camping ground where he works as a night watchman, his wandering in search of her leads him to the Palacio Benvingut, the mansion that houses Enric's secret folly.

When the Rookie comes to Z, following his sometime lover Carmen, an ex-opera singer, he finds that she has a new project: Caridad, a danger, it seems, to herself and others, for she barely eats and carries a large knife. Finding shelter at the Palacio Benvingut, Carmen and Caridad have come into possession of valuable and dangerous knowledge.

In these three stories, love is intertwined with disgrace, danger and death.

Although Roberto Bolaño was not himself an opera fan, *The Skating Rink* is metaphorically operatic in a number of ways. The novel juxtaposes voices as well as points of view. And each of those voices vibrates with a curiously invigorating energy, even when telling stories of failure and aimless drifting. Bolaño also imagines theatrical scenes in which spectators watch a performance and each other, like the key comic episode in which Nuria tries to entice Enric onto the ice, while Gaspar, hidden among the packing cases that surround the skating rink and observing the ill-assorted pair, notices Caridad, also hidden and watching, armed with her trusty knife. This scene is brilliantly rendered by Rory Mullarkey in an ensemble passage of progressively shortening lines at the end of Act One.

Treating Bolaño's novel with a strong combination of loyalty and freedom, Mullarkey draws from it an apocalyptic strain that anticipates

2666: the end of the world can be glimpsed from the end of the tourist season in the resort town of Z on the Mediterranean coast. Bolaño himself was adept at treatments of this kind. Like his literary hero Jorge Luis Borges, he was a great reteller of other people's stories and his own. He liked, in particular, to recount films, from schlock to arthouse classics: Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* is narrated at length in 'Days of 1978' (*Last Evenings on Earth*). He cannibalised his own texts and rewrote them in expanded and rearranged versions: the novel *Distant Star*, for example, 'explodes' the final chapter of *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. Like Borges, Bolaño had little time for the idea of a definitive version.

He was anything but precious about the fate of his work in the world, and I think he would have been intrigued and delighted to know that the characters that he imagined for *The Skating Rink* will live a new and different life in the dimensions of bodily movement and song. His voracious narrative imagination would have set to work immediately on the performances and the intricate preparations leading up to them.