

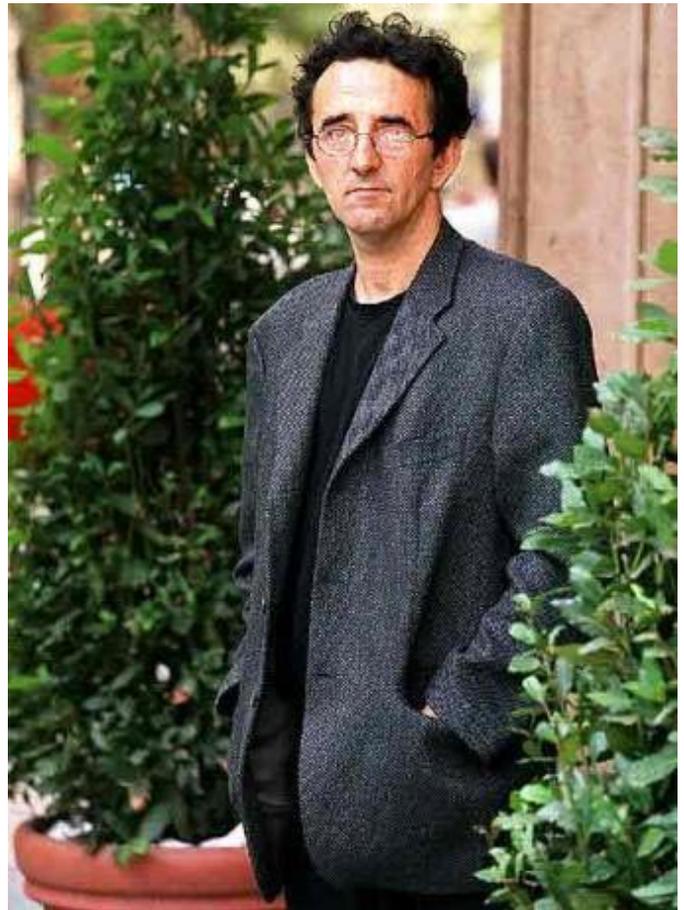
Roberto Bolaño (1953-2003)

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Although he spent much of his life as an expatriate, Roberto Bolaño was one of the most respected and acclaimed Chilean authors of modern times. After living in Mexico as a teenager, Bolaño returned to Chile with his family in 1973, the year Salvador Allende's government was overthrown. Bolaño consequently fled to Spain. Starting off his literary career as a poet before turning to novels, he initially worked a variety of jobs to support himself and cofounded the school of Infrarealism with Mario Santiago. Bolaño described Infrarealism for *Bomb* contributor Carmen Boullosa as "a kind of Dada à la Mexicana." Bolaño published his first book in 1984 while working as a night watchman. His productive years began in the 1990s, and he quickly earned a reputation as an outstanding fiction author whose style prompted critics to compare him to such writers as Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, and Julio Cortazar.

Penning stories that are often critical of or satirize society and politics in Latin America, Bolaño was considered a political writer, though the author himself denied that he had any "scores" to settle. As he told Boullosa: "All literature, in a certain sense, is political. I mean, first, it's a reflection on politics, and second, it's also a political program. The former alludes to reality-- to the nightmare or benevolent dream that we call reality-- which ends, in both cases, with death and the obliteration not only of literature, but of time. The latter refers to the small bits and pieces that survive, that persist; and to reason. Although we know, of course, that in the human scale of things, persistence is an illusion and reason is only a fragile railing that keeps us from plunging into the abyss."

Of all Bolaño's books, only one (*By Night in Chile*) had been translated into English by the time of his death from liver failure in 2003 while waiting for a transplant. This novel, set in Chile and concerned with that country's political history, is told from the viewpoint of Father Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix as he is lying on his deathbed. Lacroix is a conservative man who is also a minor poet and literary critic. As such, he represents the intellectual elite of Chilean society; as he recounts his life he tries to justify his inaction against the political injustices of the last half century, especially of the events during and after the brief socialist government of Salvador Allende that ended in the president's supposed suicide. Bolaño also touches on other themes, such as Lacroix's sexual repression and his struggles with his homosexual leanings. The priest spends much of his time avoiding confrontation and unpleasantness, burying himself in classic literature and, at one point, actively ignoring the fact that there is a torture chamber underneath a house that is serving as a salon hosted by the politically well-connected Maria Canales. "From an intellectual standpoint," commented Cynthia Tompkins in *World Literature Today*,



“the novel may be read as a critique of the huge social cost incurred by forgetting the victims of the coup. By interweaving literary creation and intellectual development with torture, the Maria Canales episode highlights the sordid nature of Chilean (or Argentine or Brazilian, et cetera) state terrorism and the daily cooptations forced upon its people.”

Reviewers of *By Night in Chile* praised Bolaño’s writing talents. For example, on the *Guardian Unlimited Books* Web site, Ben Richards called the novel “a wonderful and beautifully written book by a writer who has an enviable control over every beat, every change of tempo, every image. The prose is constantly exciting and challenging-- at times lyrical and allusive, at others filled with biting wit.” *Times Literary Supplement* contributor Jessamy Harvey wrote that the novel is an “intelligent indictment of Chile’s literary elite, suffused with dark humour and pathos.”

Following the author’s death, several more of Bolaño’s works have been translated into English and published to wide critical acclaim. Most notably, the author’s 1998 novel *Los detectives salvajes*, published in the United States as *The Savage Detectives*, has led to Bolaño being called a “‘Latin American phenomenon’ in the United States,” as noted by *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* contributor Horacio Castellanos Moya. The novel revolves around a group of Mexican poets called the “visceral realists” and their search for an early-twentieth-century mythical poet name Cesárea Tinajero, who has gone missing, apparently in the Sonora Desert. The novel spans two decades, from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, and is made up of various monologues by more than fifty characters, as well as the diary of one young poet in search of Tinajero. “Bolaño’s ambition is huge; his capacity to tell stories, never-ending,” noted Moya. “The search for the poet Tinajero is marked by the most diverse adventures.” Moya also wrote in the same review: “Each story, which starts off like a digression, enriches our knowledge about the detective poets and engages the reader even more.”

According to most reviewers, Bolaño succeeded in his ambition as the novel received almost unanimous acclaim. James Wood, writing on the *International Herald Tribune* Web site, noted: “A novel all about poetry and poets, one of whose heroes is a lightly disguised version of the author himself: how easily this could be nothing more than a precious lattice of ludic narcissism and unbearably ‘literary’ adventures! Again, Bolaño skirts danger and then gleefully accelerates away from it. The novel is wildly enjoyable (as well as, finally, full of lament), in part because Bolaño has a worldly, literal sensibility.” In a review in the *Library Journal*, Lawrence Olszewski wrote: “The journey for all, including the reader, may prove arduous, but as a picaresque road novel, coupled with successful character creation, intriguing experimentation, and a unique premise, it provides a rewarding reading experience.”

Estrella distante, published as *Distant Star*, features Carlos Wieder, a poet and an aviator who, when he is still known as Carlos Wider, goes to the retreat of two beautiful sisters following the overthrow of President Allende. Once there, he has them murdered and then takes on the identity of Wieder and becomes a favorite within the new regime of President Pinochet. Wieder gains increasing fame as a pilot and also as a poet who writes cryptic poems about the beauty of death and its place in Chilean national politics. As the novel progresses, however, Wieder becomes recognized as a fiend and soon finds himself hunted for old crimes as he goes into hiding. “The language is taut and rhythmic, elegant and spare, conveying all the texture of Bolaño’s bleak landscapes and the dark humor of his prose,” wrote Daniel Alarcon in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. *Review of Contemporary Fiction* contributor Chad W. Post noted: “There’s definitely some black humor in this novel, but its core is horrifying.”

Amulet, published in Spanish as *Amuleto*, once again features a narrator, Auxilio Lacouture, who is dedicated to poetry. However, the narrator also seems slightly mad and may be in fact a homeless woman who works as a janitor. The narrator goes on to tell her own story, in which she refers to herself as “the mother of Mexican poetry.” The story focuses on both the past and future and revolves around demonstrations in 1960s Mexico and a murder mystery. Eli Evans, writing for the *Bookslut* Web site, commented that “*Amulet*, at least in certain respects, reminds me ... of the meta-fiction of British postmodernists writing under the influence of Latin American magical realism-- writers like Martin Amis and Salman Rushdie.” A *Publishers Weekly* contributor wrote that the narrator’s “prophecies converge in a wrenching tribute to all the voices she has known, tinged with Bolano’s luminous pathos.”

Last Evenings on Earth is a collection of fourteen of the author’s short stories culled from his earlier collections in Spanish titled *Llamada telefónicas* and *Putas asesinas*. “Exile, alienation and a fatalistic sense of the impermanence of human connections and relations dominate this collection,” wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor. The works are semi-autobiographical in that often the stories feature characters whose names are derivatives of the author’s own name, including a character who is named merely “B.” These characters are minor writers and poets trying to deal with life from day to day. Daniel Alarcon, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, commented: “For those who are unfamiliar with this author, *Last Evenings on Earth* is a fine place to begin.” Like his novels that have been translated into English, the collection has received strong praise from the critics. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted the “perfectly calibrated” stories, adding that the author “limns the capacity of a voice to carry despair without shading into bitterness.” Francine Prose, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, commented: “Reading Roberto Bolaño is like hearing the secret story, being shown the fabric of the particular, watching the tracks of art and life merge at the horizon and linger there like a dream from which we awake inspired to look more attentively at the world.”

Referred to as Bolaño’s magnum opus, the novel *2666* was published posthumously in Spanish. Taking place primarily in the city of Santa Teresa, the novel features the chronicling of the murder and rape of numerous women and a hunt for a mysterious writer named Benno von Archimboldi. Writing in the *New York Times*, Larry Rohter called the novel “an extravagantly encyclopedic 1,119-page novel that traverses two continents and eight decades.”

Bolaño was posthumously awarded the National Book Critics Circle fiction prize for *2666*. Writing for the *Slate* Web site, Adam Kirsch noted that the novel “has the confident strangeness of a masterpiece: In almost every particular, it fails, or refuses, to conform to our expectations of what a novel should be.” Kirsch pointed out that the novel was originally five separate works that the author had intended to originally have published individually. Kirsch wrote: “These parts relate to one another, not as installments or sequels but, rather, as five planets orbiting the same sun. With their very different stories and settings, they seem to describe a single plummeting arc the trajectory of a universe on the verge of apocalypse.”

Other reviewers also had effusive praise for *2666*. “Written under the death sentence of the liver disease that killed him, *2666* ... is even longer and more ambitious [than *The Savage Detectives*], and this time the exhilaration stems from the sheer glory of watching a dying man face down his death with such a massive ... final statement,” wrote John H. Richardson in *Esquire*. James Crossley, writing in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, noted that the novel is “an allusive and literary book strongly concerned with the role and function of art, but it’s also deeply engaged with the mundane world,” adding in the same review that the author reveals “a facility with styles and tones from broad comedy to blackest despair.”

The Romantic Dogs: 1980-1998, translated by Laura Healy, is the author's first collection of poetry to be translated into English. Published in 2008, the collection contains some of Bolaño's earliest verse as well as later work. The poems focus on love, politics, sex, death and even poetry itself, often told via a construct involving detectives and crime. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor remarked that the poems "echo his brilliant but out-of-control authorial persona, with its high-speed, self-conscious verbal play." Donna Seaman, writing for *Booklist*, remarked that in Bolaño's poems "art and life entwine, and all is sinister and precious."

La literatura Nazi en America, was first published in Spanish in 1996. The translation by Chris Andrews published as *Nazi Literature in the Americas* appeared in English in 2008. The novel is presented as a mini-encyclopedia of Nazi literature that, in reality, doesn't exist. The book contains thirty fictional biographies of novelists, poets, and editors who expound in their writing upon their fascist or right-wing views. From the Americas, including South America and the United States, the writers typically have a violent demise although the author presents several of the writers as being relatively harmless advocates of fascist views based on their deluded sentimentalities and other frustrations. Among the writers from the United States is Rory Long, a fanatical preacher, and J.M.S. Hill, a science fiction writer who establishes the Aryan Brotherhood.

The author also includes appendices that feature descriptions of other Nazi supporters, publishing houses catering to the right wing, and organizations such as the Church of the True Martyrs of North America. The book includes a fictionalized bibliography of the different authors' works, which include titles such as *Cower, Hounds!* Numerous characters and episodes from the author's previous books, including *The Savage Detectives*, also appear in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*.

"Such literary ingenuity from a Latin American author, if not the political edginess, inevitably recalls Jorge Luis Borges," wrote Michael Dirda in a review for the *Washington Post Book World*. Dirda went on to write in the review that "Roberto Bolaño is worth discovering, worth reading-- and even worth all the trouble of having to explain why it is that you are toting around a book called *Nazi Literature in the Americas*." A *Publishers Weekly* contributor gave a similar estimate of the book, noting: "The wild inventiveness of Bolaño's evocations places them squarely in the realm of Borges."

Bolaño's 1993 novel *La Pista de Hielo*, was published in English in 2009 in a translation by Chris Andrews titled *The Skating Rink*. The novel takes place in an imaginary resort town of Z, north of Barcelona, Spain. Narrated by three different men, the novel revolves around Nuria Marti, a beautiful figure skater. Enric Rosquelles has secretly built a skating rink with funds the public civil servant has siphoned off from the government. His purpose is to provide a place for Nuria, whom he is infatuated with, to practice as she tries out for the Olympic team. However, Nuria is having a romance with Remo Moran, who has become enormously wealthy after starting out as a street vendor. Also on hand is Gaspar Heredia, an illegal Mexican immigrant who Remo hires as a night watchman for a campground that serves as a stop off for illegal immigrants. Eventually, Enric's crimes are discovered, leading to blackmail and other crimes, including a murder, with the victim's body being found in the middle of the rink. The story is told in narratives that rotate among the three men as they reveal how the self-absorbed skater impacts various peoples' lives, mostly to their detriment.

Writing for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Kevin Canfield noted: "As he's done before in his popular literary sleuth stories, Bolaño upends the formula, advancing the story in increments that fit together like damaged puzzle pieces." In his review for *Booklist*, Brad Hooper called *The Skating Rink* a "satire on the human need for gratification, sexual and otherwise."

Also translated by Andrews, *Monsieur Pain* is a “brief, wonderfully eccentric novel [that] moves around two themes he developed at length in *The Savage Detectives*,-- poets and conspiracies,” as a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer put it. The protagonist of the novel is Monsieur Pierre Pain, a middle-aged veteran of the World War I whose lungs were injured at Verdun and is now scratching out a meager existence in Paris courtesy of his government pension. Pain occupies his time by studying the occult, and he has gained a reputation as a mesmerist. One day, a beautiful widow, Madame Reynaud, who is the object of his affection, begs Pain to help her friend’s husband, Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo, who appears on the verge of death from an undiagnosed illness. Shortly after, two mysterious men pay Pain not to treat Vallejo, and after taking their bribe he ends up in a downward spiral. “The evil in *Monsieur Pain* feels ominously real, despite the fact that Bolano hardly enunciates its presence,” contended *New York Times Book Review* contributor Will Blythe. Blythe added, “The novel melds existential anxiety to political terror in a measure peculiar to Bolano.” Blythe further noted, “Readers know, as the characters of *Monsieur Pain* do not, that Paris in 1938 is a city of sleepwalkers, that a darkness soon comes its way. It is Bolano’s great gift to make us feel the dimensions of this darkness even when we cannot see exactly what it hides.” A group of reviewers for the *New Internationalist* remarked that the novel’s story is “powerfully imagined, and exquisitely told.”

Amberes, translated by Wimmer and published as *Antwerp*, was completed in 1980, but remained unpublished until 2002, shortly before Bolaño died. *Antwerp*, set in 1980s Barcelona, is less centered around a story arc and more focused on themes, reappearing characters, and narratives that are seen throughout the author’s body of work. “The short sections are like prose poems-- a bridge of sorts between Bolaño’s fiction and poetry-- with such cryptic titles as ‘A Monkey,’ ‘There Was Nothing,’ [and] ‘Big Silver Waves.’ Though not easily comprehensible, each section presents the reader with at least one startling line. A boy and a girl in ‘Cleaning Utensils,’ for example, weep ‘like characters from different movies projected on the same screen,’ stated *New York Times Book Review* contributor Michael Greenberg in a review of *Antwerp*.

El tercer reich, also translated by Wimmer and published as *The Third Reich*, was written in 1989 and found among Bolaño’s papers after his death. Set after World War II in an unspecified year, *The Third Reich*, is the story of unstable Udo Berger told over a two-month span in diary-like entries. Udo has come from Germany with his girlfriend, Ingeborg, to the Costa Brava in Spain where he vacationed a decade before. While his girlfriend is enjoying the beach, Udo becomes increasingly obsessed with a strategy game called the Third Reich. “Infused with unease and menace, deliberately ambiguous about reality vs. perception, Bolano’s novel is a psychological thriller without a convincing payoff,” remarked a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer.

Among Bolaño’s translated collections of short stories published after his death is *El gaucho insufrible*, translated by Andrews and published as *The Insufferable Gaucho*. The collection contains seven tales exploring themes of self-exile and illness. In the title story, lawyer Hector Pereda leaves Buenos Aires after the death of his wife and the collapse of the country’s economy to become a gaucho on the pampas. In another story, “Alvaro Rousselot’s Journey,” a popular Argentinean novelist sets out for Paris to confront a filmmaker who blatantly plagiarized his books. “Rat Police” is an allegorical tale told by rats, while “Literature + Illness = Illness” confronts the author’s own impending death at the age of fifty from liver disease. “The title story of this collection is one of Bolaño’s most powerful fictions,” asserted Greenberg in the *New York Times Book Review*.

The Return, a collection of thirteen short stories, “proves to be a defining sampler of Bolaño’s style, thematic concerns, and favored character types,” stated Brad Hooper in a review of the book for

Booklist. The tale “William Burns” is about an American who kills a man who was possibly stalking two women. “Prefiguration of Lalo Cura” is narrated by Lalo, the son of a porn star, who was raised in a neighborhood in Medellin, Colombia, called the Impaled. Bolaño’s alter ego, Arturo Belano, makes appearances in several stories in *The Return*. In “Detectives,” two veteran cops reminisce about holding Arturo as a prisoner after a Chilean coup, Arturo is lost in Africa while in “Photos,” “Devotees of Bolaño will recognize the writer’s merciless (and often humorous) fusion of high art and dark human nature” in “Meeting with Enrique Lihn” and “William Burns” stated a *Publishers Weekly* reviewer. “Despite the skimpy plots, dark mood, and unusual ambiance, these dozen stories will help perpetuate the almost mythic posthumous fame of Bolaño,” remarked Lawrence Olszewski in a review of the book for *Library Journal*.