

and processes characteristic of any democratic state. In so doing, Brent Meersman's book is at once a healthy criticism and an amusing celebration of South Africa's young democracy.

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Joaquín Rubio Tovar. **El sueño de los espejos**. Madrid. Ediciones de la Discreta. 2007. 173 pages. €12. ISBN 84-96322-20-3

El sueño de los espejos (The dream of the mirrors) is the first of what will hopefully be a long series of comic detective novels by Joaquín Rubio Tovar, a medievalist who has already achieved acclaim in other genres. A winner of the Gabriel Miró Prize for short stories, his exhaustive essay on the rise and demise of philology, *La vieja diosa* (The old goddess), was recently nominated for the *La Corónica* book award in the United States.

Much of Rubio Tovar's fiction is permeated with a yearning for greater simplicity and silence in our everyday lifestyle, an expression unperturbed by the perhaps more "integrated" attitude of those who choose to ridicule such primordial cravings. In *El sueño de los espejos*, a fortunate braiding of elements from the detective story and fantasy literature, José Carrasco, a down-to-earth police superintendent now approaching retirement, finds himself investigating the meanderings of a misanthropic burglar who, using a technique described by medieval Toledan alchemists and a substance derived from mercury, travels through the realm of mirrors and dreams to steal and amass valuable artifacts from libraries across the globe. Meanwhile, an international conspiracy of secret services is

attempting to monopolize this newly discovered medium of transport, with the involvement of Carrasco's immediate superiors.

Despite the fantasy, the action is played out by characters with a very corporeal presence. Carrasco, perhaps the antithesis of the stereotypical detective, suffers frequent headaches and leg pains, has been divorced for a number of years and faces a solitary aging, and fails to come to grips with the computer systems he should have long ago learned to master. In his outings, he is forced to walk up and down *Madré*, a repulsive deformation of the Madrid of his infancy, where the old landmarks used for orientation—the cinemas, taverns, and schools—have been replaced by references to motorways ("el tanatorio de la M30" [the morgue by the M30 motorway]). So stifling is *Madré*, in fact, that Carrasco refuses to leave on holiday in order not to have to return.

The setting may not be idyllic, nor is Carrasco our charismatic average hero, yet his acute pragmatism and street wisdom still make him an admirable protagonist. His few simple pleasures—among them the botanic garden and the afternoon rain—set up a number of occasions for Rubio Tovar's particularly direct style of humor, such as when Carrasco reads aloud from the bulletin of the *Sociedad Ornitológica* to young officer Golichín, only for the latter to exclaim: "Caramba, don José. ¡Qué cosas le interesan!" (My goodness, don José. What things you take interest in!)

The quick action of *El sueño de los espejos*, essentially a succession of very short episodes and the occasional monologue or reflection, makes the novel readable in a day. Successfully combining the slapstick

comedy of Cervantes with the black, more-sweet-than-bitter humor that can be found in the *Montalbano* novels of Camilleri, Joaquín Rubio Tovar's narrative has the reader warming to Carrasco's maladroit manner and melancholy from beginning to end.

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Paul Lomami Tchibamba. **Ah! Mbongo**. Paris. L'Harmattan. 2007. 336 pages. €27. ISBN 978-2-296-03523-2

The Congolese writer Paul Lomami Tchibamba (1914–85) was previously best known for *Ngando* (first published in 1949). Written over a period of three decades, and published for the first time two decades after the author's death, *Ah! Mbongo* ("Ah! Money" in Lingala) is one of the most important novels from francophone sub-Saharan Africa in recent years. In his preface, Alain Mabanckou calls it "le roman fondateur de la littérature congolaise." Generally a realistic depiction of colonial-era racism and exploitation, Tchibamba's novel also contains elements that liken it to magical realism: in the prologue, the main character's mother is suddenly swallowed up by the earth, only to miraculously reappear with her newborn son a few days later.

As the central character, Gikwa, a young Ubangi prince, is the symbolic depository of traditional values in his rural village. However, he is seduced by the lure of the capital city (Léopoldville in the Belgian Congo of the 1920s), with its gaudy and generally useless products that must be bought with hard-earned *mbongo*. Leaving behind his parents but followed by his wife, Gikwa seeks work that will bring him the exalted money, only to descend into