



The Black Minutes

Martín Solares , Aura Estrada (Translator)

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When a young journalist named Bernardo Blanco is killed in the fictional Mexican port city of Paracuán, investigation into his murder reveals missing links in a disturbing multiple homicide case from twenty years earlier. As police officer Ramón “el Macetón” Cabrera discovers, Blanco had been writing a book about a 1970s case dealing with the murder of several young schoolgirls in Paracuán by a man known as el Chacal. Cabrera realizes that whoever killed Blanco wanted to keep the truth about el Chacal from being revealed, and he becomes determined to discover that truth. *The Black Minutes* chronicles both Cabrera’s investigation into Blanco’s murder and goes back in time to follow detective Vicente Rangel’s investigation of the original el Chacal case. Both narratives expose worlds of corruption, from cops who are content to close the door on a case without true justice to powerful politicians who can pay their way out of their families’ crimes. Full of dark twists and turns, and populated by a cast of captivating—and mostly corrupt—characters, *The Black Minutes* is an electrifying novel from a brilliant new voice.

The Black Minutes Details

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From Reader Review The Black Minutes for online ebook

Monica says

This fast-paced Mexican police novel got me out of a reading drought in which I was languishing for a while battling with several opened novels. The moment I turned the first page, I knew I was embarking on a familiar and comforting detective story set in the murky waters of a fictional Mexican town following one, then two police detectives of the flawed but honourable type battling the corruption of the town's leaders and their own police colleagues to get to the bottom of some horrific crimes both past and present. You would think this is one of those typical overt-the-top Latin-American novels of corruption in which the straight guy loses and then wins because it is fiction after all and readers do like a happy ending but the minute I put down this detective-guilty pleasure and I opened the news, the first headline I read was: 'Mexican mum who investigated daughter's death is killed'. So sadly the story is not a cliché but the tragic reality of day to day life and without the happy ending.

On a side note what I love in fiction is descriptions of the characters' meals and police officers are notorious for unhealthy eating habits so I enjoyed all the mentions of Mexican food: gorditas en salsa verde, chilaquiles, enchiladas etc and I swore I would get to preparing some of these myself this weekend!

Algernon says

*I look inside myself and see my heart is black
I see my red door I must have it painted black
Maybe then I'll fade away and not have to face the facts
It's not easy facin' up, when your whole world is black*
(lyrics from The Rolling Stones)

It's a black, bleak world that Martin Solares paints in his debut novel, a city riddled with corruption where drug lords, power hungry politicians, venal union leaders and bought officers of the law dine together in fancy restaurants while little girls are kidnapped, raped and murdered with impunity.

A young reporter who investigates the decades old unsolved serial murder case is killed. The disillusioned old trooper on the police force who tries to get the threads untangled is first hobbled by his bosses and then put in hospital in a hit and run accident. While recuperating, he browses through the notes of the young officer who first investigated the case, all those years ago.

And the picture that is gradually revealed turns into darker and darker shades of black.

Son of a fucking bitch, Romero thought. Everybody's come to an agreement: the government agrees, the president agrees, they made their agreement over the girls' dead bodies. As happens everywhere, the city grew up around its tombs.

The detectives are modelled clearly on the noir canon. Ramon Cabrera, also known as El Maceton ("The Big Flowerpot") is elderly, cranky, cynical, heavy fisted, heavy drinker, in a dysfunctional marriage. (*Their last fight was over the remote control. His wife complained they never talk anymore, that he was always quiet, that he only wanted to make love and then watch TV.*). He is also persistent, methodic, considerate, honest: as a result he's shunned and ridiculed by most of his colleagues as a sort of dinosaur, out of touch with reality.

Vicente Rangel Gonzales is a misfit, accidentally brought into the police force by his legendary uncle, Don

Miguel Rivera, who recognized the sharp intelligence and the iron core of integrity in the apparently aimless young man of the seventies. I see him in my mind as a Latino version of Serpico, “an idealist in a sea of corruption” as Solares puts it.

With strong leading characters, colourful setting, sharp dialogue and gruesome murders, the novel has the key ingredients of a good police procedural. Solares is not content with writing a noir homage though. He goes for the highbrow literary angle with an incredible skill for a debut author. His mastery of timeshifts, his ability to insert politics, religion, economics, popular culture into the narrative, his skill at creating memorable secondary characters and to evoke their inner turmoil in terse paragraphs – all speak of a major talent and of a novel that transcends the genre limitations to address the most important issues of the individual and of society.

The town of Paracuan described in the book is fictional, but its portrayal was so convincing that I actually did a search for the state of Tamaulipas to try to identify the author’s source of inspiration. I have only to think of the news coming out of Mexico in recent years (kidnappings, corruption, political grandstanding, innocents caught up in the middle of a merciless war) to realize that the ‘mean streets’ of Raymond Chandler have migrated South of the Border, where the people are in dire need of detectives like Cabrera or Rangel.

At times, he felt like reality actually consisted of several layers of lies, one piled on top of another.

Easter Eggs:

- B Traven, the reclusive author of The Treasure of Sierra Madre makes a cameo appearance, with references also to John Ford and the making of the movie.
- Alfonso Cuero Quaron, a famous criminologist, has a whole section of the novel narrated from his POV.
- there’s a leit-motiv of a poster of Cola Drinks that keeps popping out in the text, not unlike the eyes in F Scott Fitzgerald’s Gatsby. A metaphor for the menacing presence of the Big Brother to the North?

Recommended!

Thanks to the Pulp Fiction group for pointing this gem out to me!

Solistas says

3.5/5*

Μου ε?ναι αδ?νατο να θυμηθ? γιατί αγ?ρασα αυτ? το βιβλ?ο αλλ? η λογικ? λ?ει ?τι ε?τε το π?ρα γιατ? μου ?ρεσε π?ρα πολ? το εξ?φυλλο ε?τε επειδ? λατρε?ω τον Taibo κ η προοπτικ? να διαβ?σω ?να ν?ο Μεξικαν? συγγραφ?α αστυνομικ?ν ιστορι?ν, δεδομ?να με εξιτ?ρει. ?ταν μια καλ? επιλογ?, αρχικ? γιατί κ?λλησα με την ιστορ?α την οπο?α ε?χα συν?χεια στο μυαλ? μου ακ?μα κι ?ταν δεν ?βρισκα χρ?νο να την προχωρ?σω και τ?λος γιατί π?ντα υπ?ρχει μια μικρ? ικανοπο?ηση ?ταν διαβ?ζεις ?να ?μορφο βιβλ?ο χωρ?ς να ξ?ρεις τι να περιμ?νεις ?ταν το πι?νεις για πρ?τη φορ? στα χ?ρια σου.

Το Black Minutes β?βαια δεν ε?ναι τ?λειο, το πρ?το μ?ρος του περι?χει αρκετ?ς ενδε?ξεις ?γουρου συγγραφ?α αλλ? αυτ? λ?νονται ?σο προχωρ?ς, γεγον?ς που μ?λλον σημα?νει ?τι η μεταφρ?στρια δεν ?χει κ?νει κ την καλ?τερη δουλει?. Η ιστορ?α εξελ?σεται σε μια π?λη που λ?γεται Paracuan κ

η αφητηρ?α της ε?ναι η δολοφον?α εν?ς δημοσιογρ?φου που η ?ρευνα του για τη διαφθορ? της π?λης τον οδηγε? δεκαετ?ες π?σω, στη ?ρευνα κ σ?λληψη ?νος serial killer μικρ?ν κοριτσι?ν. Το μεγαλ?τερο μ?ρος του βιβλ?ου ασχολε?ται με αυτ? την υπ?θεση κ εκε? βρ?σκονται οι καλ?τερες σελ?δες του. Ο Solares ?χει στ?σει μια πολ? ωρα?α πλοκ? που παρακολουθε?ς με ?σο κ?πο χρει?ζεται για να μη νομ?ζεις ?τι ?χεις μπλ?ξει με ?να crime story της σειρ?ς κ π?νω απ'?λα ζωντανε?ει τους τ?πους που διαδραματ?ζεται κ φτι?χνει ?να σκασμ? ολοζ?ντανους χαρακτ?ρες που καταλαβα?νεις πως θα αντιδρ?σουν κ?θε στιγμή?.

Το μεγ?λο ατο? του βιβλ?ου (κ κ?ριος λ?γος να το προτε?νεις σε κ?ποιον που ασχολε?ται με αυτ? το ε?δος) ε?ναι ο ?ξοχος τρ?πος που παρουσι?ζει τις κοινωνικ?ς κ πολιτικ?ς δομ?ς, χωρ?ς διδακτισμο?ς κ ?μορφα τσιτ?τα που θα ?καναν ωρα?ους τ?τλους βιβλίοκριτικ?ν. Εδ? ο Solares αφ?νει τον αναγν?στη του να σκεφτε? π?ρα απ'?σα συμβα?νουν σε πρ?το πλ?νο. Χωρ?ς να υπ?ρχει ξεκ?θαρος λ?γος, ε?χα συν?χεια στο μυαλ? μου το πολ? ?νισο "χο των πραγμ?των ?ταν π?φτουν", ?σως λ?γω συγγενικ?ς καταγωγ?ς με τον Vasquez αλλ? μ?λλον επειδ? ?ταν γεμ?το με τ?τοιες ατ?κες (στην Κολομβ?α κανε?ς δεν ε?ναι αθ?ος κ.ο.κ.), χωρ?ς αυτ? να σημα?νει απαρα?τητα ?τι θεωρ? το Black Minutes αν?τερο του προαναφερ?μενου βιβλ?ου ? τον Solares πιο ταλαντο?χο συγγραφ?α. Απλ? ο Μεξικαν?ς μου φαντ?ζει πιο αν?συχος συγγραφ?ας, κ?τι που φα?νεται κι απ'τις επιτυχημ?νες απ?πειρες του να ξεφ?γει απ'τα δεδομ?να του ε?δους που υπηρετε? πα?ζοντας ?ξυπνα με ονειρικ? αποσπ?σματα και τοποθετ?ντας σε κα?ριο σημει?ο (εκε? που οι πολλ?ς σελ?δες θα μπορο?σαν να κουρ?σουν) μια ξεκαρδιστικ? κατ?θεση εν?ς τελε?ως σουρεαλιστικο? χαρακτ?ρα, του ανιψιο? του διευθυντ? της αστυνομιας της π?λης.

?σοι ψ?χνουν αφορμ? για να παρεκλ?νουν απ'το αναγνωστικ? τους πρ?γραμμα, θα βρουν μια πολ? καλ? επιλογ? εδ?

Kathleen says

Masquerading as a crime novel, Martín Solares' *The Black Minutes* is actually a fine piece of literature . The novel is set in a northern Mexico port city that is riddled with narcotraficos, police corruption and some sketchy Americans whose businesses dominate the local economy. The story begins when a young reporter is found murdered, and one of the local detectives is sent out to investigate. Over time, he finds links to some unsolved crimes, the kidnapping and murder of small girls in the 1970s. Solares weaves the narrative going back and forth from the perspective of the 1970s detective and his work on that case to the present detective and his work that is tangled in the past. At times, the novel is rollicking fun (the police officers regularly seem to be beating each other up), but by the end you realize that Solares has taken you on a ride that plunges you hard and fast into some of the most pressing questions about life in Mexico, present and past. A great read, I highly recommend it.

Melki says

Isn't it true that in the life of every man there are five black minutes?

A journalist is murdered in Paracuan, a Mexican port city, and the clues left behind point to an incident that occurred more than thirty years prior.

When the state sets out to hurt somebody, nothing can be done to stop it.

I really started to get into the book when the action flashes back to 1977 and the search for a killer of little girls. Vicente Rangel Gonzalez, quite possibly the world's most reluctant detective, has pulled the case.

Rangel had spent six years on the force, the last four trying to resign. He was always saying he was going to resign, but every time he was on the verge of doing so he got involved in some difficult case and ended up putting it off again.

Rangel was talked into joining the police force by his beloved uncle who offers some wise counsel.

Get one thing straight: as long as you're in this business, you're not going to have any friends. You heard right: not one friend. Everyone who gets close to you is going to ask for something or want to use you for something. You can't trust anybody. A police officer doesn't have friends when he's doing his job; a police officer only has enemies. The trick is to learn how to avoid them.

These words prove to be good advice as Rangel becomes more and more immersed in the investigation.

This is a fairly standard police procedural spiced up by the locale, the author's excellent descriptions and the incredible amount of political corruption that affects the way local residents conduct their lives. I'm assigning it four stars due to the quality of the writing more than the story. On the whole I was satisfied with the book, though there were a few times that I just wanted it to end.

Poupee says

Cuenta una historia policiaca llena de intrigas y misterios que te mantiene atrapado de principio a fin. Me gustó y lo recomiendo si te gustan las historias de ese género y si no, también lo vas a disfrutar. Al final el autor dice que es una historia de Ficción y los crímenes no son reales, pero estoy segura que muchos aspectos de la novela están basados en realidades de los policía, los políticos, el crimen organizado y el narco mexicano.

Jeff Scott says

“...everyone has five black minutes...”

And so begins one of the better detective noir stories out there. While reading, I am constantly reminded of the classics of noir fiction like Dashiell Hammett's Red Harvest, one honest detective in a crooked town. Corruption is rampant and obvious, but who is willing to take the risk to put a stop to it. However, in Solares' case, you get a little Latin American Surrealism with your detective noir. It's a light version, but for those expecting a straightforward police procedural need to be warned of these surrealistic qualities. I'm not a big mystery reader, but this story is more interesting because it does bring up the noir aspect I like in a detective story AND has that strange quality in surrealism that keeps you on your toes.

The story begins with a chance meeting between Agent Ramon Cabrera and Bernardo Blanco. When Blanco turns up dead, Cabrera is assigned to the case. He finds that Blanco was a reporter who was researching the Jackal, a serial killer who was thought to be put away 30 years ago by now chief of police Toboada, but was that really what happened? In researching Blanco's murder, Cabrera must re-examine the case to find his killer, and Cabrera's story morphs into Vincente Rangel's story, the original detective on the Jackal case.

Two honest detectives 30 years apart try to crack the case despite the fact that no one wants them to solve it, maybe even the police. Told from different perspectives, the case is re-opened examining old interviews from original witnesses. Each interview is told in alternating chapters along with the main narrative of the story. Each provides a clue to who the real killer is and who may be covering it up. Along the way some really weird stuff happens involving the King of the Martians, psychedelic detectives, the Mexican Sherlock Holmes, some communists, drug dealers, politicians, and corrupt cops. Some said this is a "quixotic adventure" but I feel that description lessens the importance of the story. There are some surrealist moments, but for the detectives, this is no joke, and uncovering the murderer may cost both of them their lives.

One part Dashielle Hammet and one part Roberto Bolano (so many parts reminded me of 2666). Highly recommended for those who love a good old-fashion detective noir, but don't mind a little surrealism.

"That's when I had a revelation, a real vision that hit me all of a sudden: these folks were going to die without ever having lived, life was going to fuck them up, just like my family does to the Christmas turkey, slice by slice, and they were going to die without finding out why or for what they had come into the world. It was enough to see how they were all standing there, staring at the empty dance floor. I was overcome by an overwhelming sense of sadness." P 311

Warmingstorms says

A novel with narratives that fracture off into different narrators once in a while, with sometimes heavily stylized voices, okay that's fine. Detective novel with procedural passages, uniquely Mexican flavour to the Police organization, specific historical critique of said Police, all okay too.

It's just the narrative voices (apart from the two main characters Cabrera and Rangel) all sound the same, periphery characters are sketched and given very little detail, thought processes and motivations are barely touched upon, and the plot is, when viewed in hindsight, haphazard and poorly serviced. There's some anachronisms too (CD players in the 70s? really? [I'm willing to accept that's a translation issue, but it does happen numerous times]).

The ending is not only anti-climactic but also nonsensical, entirely eliding details and having major events happen off-page.

I like some elements, some nice flowing descriptions of Paracuan (the fictional city where the novel takes place), casual descriptions of delicious sounding food, half decent police procedural stuff, interesting insight into 70s police enforcement in Mexico and etc. It just wasn't very good in the end.

Joe says

The Black Minutes is a detective/crime novel set in a fictional Mexican town which unfolds in a unique

fashion in that it is told from multiple perspectives. While the format lends some interest to the proceedings it is also a drawback in that the voices of the main characters blend and the voices of the secondary characters add little overall. The story is interesting enough - the current day murder of a journalist opens up a decades old investigation into a series of gruesome child murders - however the threads of the story get bogged down in the author's desire to outline police corruption and how it impacted both investigations. The story starts with the present day investigation but quickly delves into the past and spends far too long there. Many of the characters exist in both time frames and have nicknames which the author uses interchangeably. After a while it becomes a struggle to remember who is being talked about. When the story ultimately returns to the present day, the outcome is largely unsatisfactory. All in all an interesting premise that could have been presented in a better fashion.

Lindsey says

It's hard to believe that "The Black Minutes" is Martin Solares' first novel. Elevating the form of detective noir, he weaves an intriguing portrait of a small Mexican drilling community that is both romantic and horrific.

The novel is set in two time-periods. In present day, a journalist is murdered and investigator Ramon Cabrera uncovers his expose on the grisly deaths of several young girls twenty-years prior. The bulk of the book revolves around that story, in which we are introduced to a second detective, Vincent Rangel, the head of the investigation into the serial killings, however reluctantly on his part. Both detectives are honest men in a city run by a corrupt and dangerous government. But Vincent Rangel's story is sepia-toned, nostalgic. His lively dialogue and detailed characterization add depth to the fast-paced story. There are snippets of Solares' writing that are truly poetic, and the story is original and gripping. It's not the most challenging literary work to grace the library's shelves by any means, but was a highly entertaining read. It will be interesting to see if Solares continues with similar drama and structure in his next work, or ventures down a different path. Either way, his second novel will be highly anticipated, for "The Black Minutes" is certainly promising.

Natalie Hamilton says

Enjoyable read but Solares breaks a few cardinal rules of detective/police procedural fiction that undermine the quality of the story, particularly as it relates to the perpetrator of the crimes. I was drawn to the book by reviews indicating magical realism or surrealism, but those reviewers clearly don't understand the generic distinctions. There are some unusual (and rather marvellous) passages, but each of them is explained away as a dream or dream state, which eliminates any magical realist or surrealist connection. I found the ending to be unsatisfying, but I did enjoy the narrative journey, and Solares' talent is evident in this debut, so I will be watching for his next book.

katie says

THIS IS FABULOUS!!! Highly recommended!!!

Terry says

I was eager to read this book after seeing very positive reviews -- some said a "police procedural," which I like but my main interest was that it's by a Mexican author and set in Mexico, so I was really looking forward to some real sense of place and culture -- which I didn't really get in this book. It was hard to connect to the characters (it's told from different perspectives) and to keep up with the names and nicknames (a glossary helps, but a little more development of identity of the characters would also help -- rather than just naming names). There's a touch of magical realism in this book, too, which other than Isabel Allende (whose writing I love) doesn't always work for me. At one point I was very critical of the writing -- then I thought it was the translation (too literal) -- then I realized it was actually the voice of the character who was narrating that chapter, so I warmed to it a bit and other sections are much more fluently written and translated. I finished the book slowly, but I did finish it, despite my disappointment.

JBP says

This crime novel by Mexican author Martin Solares is a mixture of police procedural, serial killer thriller and exploration of corrupt cops set in a seaside Mexican city that started out really energetic and vibrant, but by the end was completely rambling, stumbling to a finishing point. At 430 pages, this novel could have [and should have] used some trimming and tightening up. The unhinged, all-over-the-place way the story is told and writing style of Solares might have been intentional to convey the out of control chaos of the world of the cops, but it is too often pointless with repeating scenes over and over of the same things. This cut into the suspense too as by the end I didn't really care who killed the reporter or the girls.

Ty Wilson says

This is a tale of a murder. A murder that leads to a deeper mystery about some long ago murders of little girls. This is a tale of Mexico, Mexico now and Mexico then, although surprising little had changed between the two time periods. This is a noir tale with heroes who don't want to be where they are, nor do they do a whole lot to change that situation. This is a tale of a police department overflowing with characters, each and every one with a unique nickname, and they run the gamut from insightful and intelligent to slovenly and dim. This is a tale at times as real as anything you'll ever read, and at times it is filled with magical realism...and somehow the two work perfectly together. This is a tale wonderfully written by a first-time author and I truly hope they've translated more of his works into English. If I'm lucky this won't be the last Martin Solares book I read.
