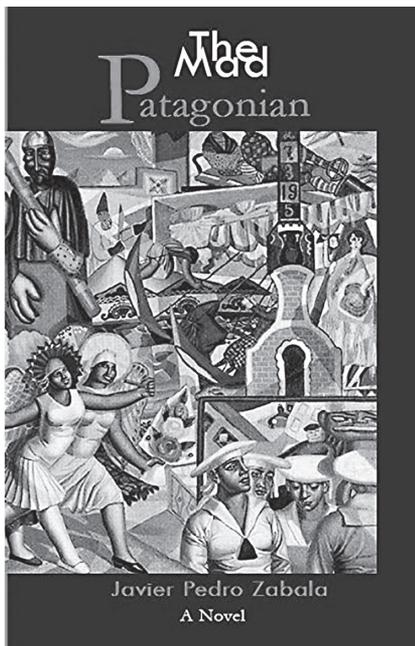


THE MAD PATAGONIAN

Javier Pedro Zabala

Translated by Tomás García Guerrero
River Boat Books (\$30)



After reading Proust, Virginia Woolf questioned if anything remained to be written. Javier Pedro Zabala's encyclopedic, multi-generational page-turner is a strong, if belated, answer. The book is vast and, like Borges's aleph, appears to contain everything; its scope and vision recall Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Roberto Bolaño, and Sergio de la Pava. As the translator's sumptuous introduction indicates, Zabala secretly worked on the manuscript from 1983 to 2002, and the result is an expansive consciousness grappling with a variety of ideas: what constitutes reality; the problem of suffering; the ambiguity of identity; the elusiveness of love.

These 1,200 pages consist of three groups of three

interconnected novellas—a trio of trios—that unveil the secrets and sojourns of the Escoraz family across time and space, navigating from Florida to Spain to Cuba to Eastern Europe. The lengths of the novellas ascend to a peak and descend, forming a pyramid of which the vertex is the fifth book, which plays like a 1950s film noir. As the historical milieux change, the prose adapts to complement, à la *Cloud Atlas*. The progression of the narratives also mirrors the transition from youth to old age like the stories of Joyce's *Dubliners*, allowing Zabala to modulate from Rabelaisian reverie (and humor to rival *A Naked Singularity*) to poetic sublimity and deft yarn-spinning. The beginning is obstreperous and sarcastic, moving into a bacchanalian agon; the middle

slows, lengthens, and matures like the long isthmus of our middle years; and the ending is reflective, winsome, weathered, and wise.

Zabala is a raconteur above all, with endless narrative techniques at his disposal. The book is packed with enough stories to be considered Cuba's *Arabian Nights*. Whether in the form of a biblical pericope, seriocomic sketch, postcards, journal entries, or a detective's field notes, the rhizomatic layering of stories elevates *The Mad Patagonian* to mythological heights. The most complex narrative centers on the enigmatic Isidora and the host of deceased ancestors who crowd her consciousness with a cacophony of voices and a cavalcade of tales—at one point the narration is at least five levels deep. Still, Zabala is not above an homage to Carroll's

"Jabberwocky" to reward effort.

The leitmotif of the book is that nothing is what it seems; coincidentally, the Internet is already churning with Pynchonian conspiracies of authorship. In the final novella, Zabala uses a professor as an intellectual piñata, from which theories and conspiracies come tumbling like Umberto Eco's greatest hits. But it is not pastiche or posturing—there is always purpose, even if it is often elusive. Everyone in *The Mad Patagonian* is looking for paradise, only to find, as Proust did, "the true paradises are the paradises that we have lost." This new, highly accessible maximalist novel is the lost paradise of a mind on fire with poetry and a heart longing for home. Like Andres Escoraz's library, Zabala's epic is "the visible expression of his soul."

—Chris Via

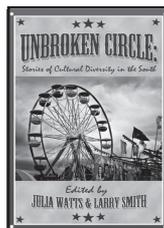
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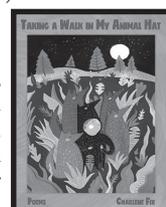
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