

A Death in Mexico

Jonathan Woods

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When the mutilated body of an American art model is discovered in the Mexican town of San Miguel de Allende late one night, local inspector Hector Diaz knows his life is about to become much more complicated. South of the border, *American* is synonymous with *trouble* and a murdered gringa from a wealthy Texas family, discovered by an American couple on vacation, can only bring the wrong kind of attention. Unfortunately for Diaz, San Miguel has become a mecca for wayward Yanks, and as he rushes to catch the murderer, Diaz finds Americans everywhere: expatriot artists from LA, bored housewives on vacation, revelers looking for the next good time. Diaz knows he has precious little time to find the killer before the news hits US television and the American media turns his town into a sideshow. Fitting, then, that his investigation may take him into America itself before the end.

Woods writes a deft, fast-paced whodunit in *A Death in Mexico*, a follow-up that delivers on the promise of *Bad Juju*, his award-winning short story collection published last year. Although the prose might occasionally make a close reader blanch, and the diary pages interspersed throughout the text come off as gimmicky instead of effective, Woods makes up for any freshman shortcomings by giving readers what they are looking for: action, entertaining characters, and a fast-moving plot. Although Diaz is the novel's focus, Woods's supporting cast, the grotesque population of San Miguel, all pursuing the next drink and the next amorous encounter, often steal the show. Delivered in Woods's deadpan prose, these comedic elements balance the violence at the core of this noir comedy, luring the eager reader in for the next one-two punch the author has lined up.

Seeing his next target for the first time, an American pickup artist muses that she "reminded him of a very long, slow, opium dream." *A Death in Mexico* is not an opium dream, exactly, but perhaps a mezcal nightmare, a smooth combination of hilarity and violence by an author who has found his voice. Hopefully, it's the forerunner of many more to come.

MICHAEL BEEMAN (Summer 2012)

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