

A Zero Sum Game

Eduardo Rabasa

Christina MacSweeney, Translator

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“Outside of vague moral notions and Manichean fables, truth was, in reality, no use at all,” muses a character on his deathbed, in Eduardo Rabasa’s ambitious, oft-hilarious political farce, *A Zero-Sum Game*. Absurdly surreal lines like this abound in the trenchant satire, and in an American election year like none before, this translation of a Mexican novel resonates as eerily prophetic.

Rabasa takes the highly orchestrated maneuvers of a typical presidential campaign and applies them to an intensive eleven-day micro-election between a stalwart political power monger, Selon Perdumes, and a personally embattled political upstart Max Michels, as they campaign for control of a fictitious squalid suburb known as Villa Miserias.

Literary devices are used to lampoon everything from plastic surgery to social and cognitive linguistics to law enforcement. A multitudinous cast features the forlorn college dropout Max, as well as an outcast group that includes a metaconceptual artist, a reporter, and a slumlord villain.

With a plethora of social ills to choose from, Rabasa utilizes many to superb comic effect. His deft handling of law enforcement manages to ridicule the drug-addled police force, the Black Paunches, and enterprising drug dealers equally well. He manages the difficult task of remaining both political and incisive, all while maintaining character development and plot. Rabasa’s authorial finesse with satire, although uproarious, does diffuse the narrative flow of the story at times, but in such an entertaining fashion that it’s easily forgivable.

Much of the book’s humor is effective in great part thanks to Christina MacSweeney’s translation, a Sisyphean task, considering the demands of Rabasa’s world building and intricacy of the text.

With echoes of *1984* and *Brave New World*, Rabasa delivers a forceful, hysterical debut that's one for the political ages. This timely novel riffs on challenges that are at the fore globally—drugs, poverty, and class division. *A Zero Sum Game* is a welcome addition to contemporary Mexican literature, with a voice and intellect that is astute and vibrant, providing much-needed commentary on Mexican-American relations and the abuses of capitalism.

MONICA CARTER (Winter 2017)

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