



Island of Point Nemo

Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès

Hannah Chute, Translator

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Twisted humor provokes, while dense, finely tuned writing dazzles.

Island of Point Nemo is a serpentine mystery by Jean-Marie Blas de Roblès. The story of a stolen diamond, murder, and an e-reader factory run by a Chinese voyeur takes unpredictable turns that are contemporary and vintage at once. Translated from the French by Hannah Chute, this unconventional work explores perversity with a deep delight in ideas and language.

When three severed feet turn up in Scotland, three detectives set forth to capture the criminal. The brutal mystery alternates with interludes that feature B@bil Books factory employees, the factory's boss, and a series of cryptic telegrams.

Often centered on strange events and peculiar habits, each section adds another episode to the wider tale of people who, each in their own way, confront what fate has set before them. For all its visceral, often sexual detail, the plot quickly establishes itself as an old-fashioned caper.

The skillful narration captures places and lives with a free sense of time. Edwardian theater, a killing worthy of a penny dreadful on the Trans-Siberian Railway, and a French cigar outfit coexist with online dating and video surveillance. An expansive fearlessness permits everything from an instance of yellowface by an illusionist to a couple's bizarre, repeated attempts to cure a husband's impotence.

In a world where death by rhino is as likely as a lightning strike to a brassiere, the material never entirely runs away. Beneath the outrageousness, there's clear affection for the characters. Even when private tragedies are used for dramatic emphasis, characters don't become easy punchlines.

It's impossible not to admire the madcap nature of the detectives, just as it's impossible to take the factory workers' trials entirely to heart. Twisted humor provokes, while dense, finely tuned writing dazzles.

Two of the detectives—Canterel and Holmes—and Holmes's assistant, Grimod, are particularly impressive as parodies of the genre. Amid their struggles to get from one point to the next, they encounter obstacles that range from plausible to absurd. They're erudite, possess uncanny intuition, and are often just plain lucky in their quest.

Island of Point Nemo is clever farce, but it's also a self-reflexive work on the power of storytelling.

KAREN RIGBY (September/October 2017)

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