

Mala Vida

Marc Fernandez

Molly Grogan, Translator

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Real history and contemporary events collide in Marc Fernandez's crime novel *Mala Vida*.

Radio host Diego Martin finds himself the Spanish media's token leftist after an election brings the nationalist party back into power. Then, Isabel Ferrer's activist group drops a bombshell: Francisco Franco's military dictatorship, which ruled Spain from 1939 to 1975, abducted thousands of babies from dissidents and put them up for adoption. Diego plays a key role in breaking the story, while also investigating a string of murders of powerful right wing figures who are all connected to the Franco regime's child trafficking.

The book is written in crisp present tense, often with the rhythm of a ticking stopwatch. There's an feeling of paranoia, with the leads constantly looking over their shoulders for spies and hurrying from one bit of business to the next. Setting details condense a lot of cultural context into an easily understood form.

This crime novel does not much turn the screws in on its characters, though. Even when thugs threaten them, they are not too intimidating, and results don't always feel earned as much as they seem handed to characters. The plot feels constrained, with only a few named individuals playing a significant role.

The lost children of Francoism are a historical fact, and the novel works hardest to explore how those injustices happened. That takes primacy over the murder plot, which is all but an afterthought, with the perpetrator revealed to the reader early on. The details of the child abductions are compelling.

Mala Vida is riveting in its adaptation of historical realities into a thriller atmosphere.

DANIEL SCHINDEL (January/February 2019)

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