

The Illegal

John Mort

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Texas is north of Mexico, but in John Mort's insightful and delightful novel, *The Illegal*, Texas is northern Mexico. Or so it seems to Lieutenant Mario Oliveros when he finds himself trying to survive in the desert of the Lone Star state. His attitude is like Texas's adage—try to be alone, among the thousands of other illegal immigrants, and go north. The Mexican military assumed Mario died after a botched drug deal. The Americans would deport him back to Mexico where he would be executed for being AWOL from the Mexican army. So Mario works his way methodically through Texas, where he encounters the underbelly of the American farm economy.

Mort's style is brisk, and his prose reveals the seamier side of how the fruits, vegetables, and meats get from the rural farm to the American table. Mario is determined. His military training gives him an advantage in survival techniques, and his innate smarts and likability enable him to move from one job to another as he distances himself both physically and psychologically from his family and homeland.

In addition to a strong central character, Mort also creates a variety of endearing minor personalities who, just as they become interesting, are dispatched in a variety of gruesome ways: his army buddies die in a shoot-out, a despotic boss has his throat slit, and a generous friend accidentally drowns in newly poured cement. But as one character exits, another enticing one emerges in his place. The invigorating pace of the novel allows for a population of memorable people.

Mort's narrator has an eye for the commonplace and a voice that captures the mentality of the Mexican who is voting with his feet to get a toehold into the American culture. The narrator reflects that "a man is hungry and hurt and almost out of strength, but ahead he sees the great fence along the border, and a hole he can duck through. He picks up his feet and runs the last mile—even as the wolves pounce." With such succinct observation, the narrator correctly identifies the motive and hope of immigrants.

This enjoyable, well-written, and perceptive novel is most welcomed at a time in US history when the issue of immigration is at the forefront of American politics. One hopes that understanding one fictional person's quest will enable understanding and appreciation of the many real ones.

THOMAS H. BRENNAN (Winter 2014)

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