

The Mexican Gardener

Len Lamensdorf

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If *The Mexican Gardener* were a movie, you'd be well served to finish your popcorn during the previews because there isn't a lot of downtime during the story. Len Lamensdorf starts with urgent action: chemist José Rivera-Diego is shaving his head and changing his truck's license plate on his very hurried way out of town. On his heels is Hector Palacios, megalomaniac CEO of the ultra-successful company KEMEX, where José had been working in good faith until he discovered what really went on in their secret laboratories. José knows what evil Hector is capable of and that there is literally no time to waste.

Lamensdorf writes with brisk confidence, whisking José from place to place, present to past, without missing a beat. The story is complex enough to make an intriguing puzzle—which of José's "friends" are for real is an ongoing question, for instance—but doesn't rely on unnecessarily complicated scaffolding to support it. Likewise, Lamensdorf addresses larger themes, such as class and racial discrimination, but he doesn't let them impede the story's progress. Instead, such issues are a natural part of José's life and fit seamlessly into his tale.

It's a tale that takes us from California to Mexico and back again and culminates in a truly unsettling "treasure hunt" that seals José's determination to stop Hector from implementing his bio-terrorist plans.

SHEILA M. TRASK (Winter 2014)

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