

## The Reef

**Juan Villoro**

**Yvette Siegert, Translator**

George Braziller (May 2, 2017)

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*The Reef is a multifaceted exploration of human nature and the ways in which people contend with life after loss.*

"Peterson achieved the American Dream without wanting to attain it, and his success felt like a second annihilation. In my eyes, that alone gave him a certain dignity," muses Tony Góngora, protagonist in Juan Villoro's biting and satirical examination of tourist culture and human connection, *The Reef*. Pithy yet complex lines like this abound, revealing a prolific tale of violence, escapism, overdevelopment, and philosophy set in the picturesque Mexican Caribbean.

Beautifully translated to English by Yvette Siegert, *The Reef* follows Góngora on his quest to solve the murder of Ginger Oldenville, American scuba diver and close friend. Set amidst a bizarre Caribbean resort aptly named The Pyramid for its distinct design, other concerns such as guerrilla warfare, imminent cartel activity, and troubling childhood memories disrupt the progress of the investigation.

Literary devices skillfully ridicule everything from tourist culture to the ennui projected by the jaded wealthy. An ample cast features the damaged and ever-seeking Góngora, as well as an eccentric group of outsiders that includes shady hotel manager Mario, cursedly lucky Gringo Peterson, and the epitome of bastardized Eastern philosophy, Sandra.

Villoro's language is fluid and dreamlike, seamlessly weaving together past and present in a way that mirrors natural thought. As Góngora investigates the increasingly strange series of events that led to Oldenville's murder, his past is unintentionally evoked through memories—from his chaotic days as a rock 'n' roll musician to his childhood after the mysterious loss of his father.

The novel's humor translates well and is balanced nicely with a deep sense of foreboding, many situations toeing the line between funny and frightening. Villoro manages the difficult task of balancing a surreal aesthetic with adept social commentary, all while maintaining character development and plot. He uses space wisely, and each scene is jam-packed with necessary exposition.

From characters grappling with obsessive nostalgia to the chaos and hedonism that ecological annihilation brings about, *The Reef* is a multifaceted exploration of human nature and the ways in which people contend with life after loss.

Villoro's first novel translated to English, *The Reef* is an overwhelming success, firmly solidifying his spot as a front-runner in contemporary Mexican literature.

AMANDA ADAMS (May/June 2017)

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