



The Savior of 6th Street

Orlando Ortega-Medina

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The Savior of 6th Street is Orlando Ortega-Medina's lucid and engrossing new novel about a man who grows up in Los Angeles's dark, 1980s underworld.

Virgilio is twenty years old, an accomplished artist, and street smart. He lives in an impoverished neighborhood near the edge of downtown that's populated by immigrants, the homeless, and the "tunnel people" who occupy a shadow world under the streets. Striking descriptions capture the neighborhood's "darkened buildings and abandoned picture palaces" and the dive bar that smells of "beer and Lysol, its trademark scent, as iconic as Chanel No. 5."

Virgilio is tough minded, but compassionate, and his character is sympathetic and involving. He protects his Cuban mother, a seer or *santera*, and notes that he was four when his father abandoned them, leaving Virgilio "bereft with a massive wound in my heart." His best friend, Concha, is a drag queen. Virgilio walks a fine line between treating Concha with kindness while not giving her "the wrong idea."

Compelling depictions of Virgilio's creative work include his painting *The Savior of 6th Street*:

It contained within it all the elements of my life...floating high above, gazing down on it all, was me, naked...a crown of nails encircling my head, a sacred heart blazing from my chest, hot to the touch of any who dared get that close to it.

These paintings gain the attention of wealthy, beautiful Beatrice and her friend Anne, a journalist and art reviewer. The women promote his work and arrange exhibitions in New York and Paris. But he is conflicted about this attention, describing Beatrice as his "Lucifer," entering "my world as if descending from Heaven intent on pulling me out of Hades." Virgilio faces a series of challenging decisions that shape who he is, whom he loves, and what he values.

Depicting a sinewy young man coming into his own, *The Savior of 6th Street* is a gritty and unexpected novel.

KRISTEN RABE (September / October 2020)

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