



The Secret of Evil

Roberto Bolaño , Natasha Wimmer (Translator) , Chris Andrews (Translator)

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Opening this book is like being granted access to the Chilean master's personal files. Included in this one-of-a-kind collection is everything Roberto Bolaño was working on just before his death in 2003, and everything that he wanted to share with his readers. Fans of his writing will find familiar characters in new settings, and entirely new stories and styles, too.

A North American journalist in Paris is woken at 4 a.m. by a mysterious caller with urgent information. Daniela de Montecristo (familiar to readers of *Nazi Literature in the Americas* and *2666*) recounts the loss of her virginity. Arturo Belano returns to Mexico City and meets the last disciples of Ulises Lima, who play in a band called The Asshole of Morelos. Belano's son Gerónimo disappears in Berlin during the Days of Chaos in 2005. Memories of a return to the native land; Argentine writers as gangsters; zombie schlock as allegory... and much more.

The Secret of Evil Details

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From Reader Review The Secret of Evil for online ebook

Raúl Tello says

En este volumen póstumo se muestran escritos inacabados por Bolaño. Algunos son claramente autobiográficos. Es interesante el ensayo que hace sobre la literatura argentina tras la muerte de Borges. Mi historia favorita es la de los hermanos huérfanos. Es una lectura recomendable y disfrutable.

jeremy says

as the pool of roberto bolaño's as yet untranslated (or unpublished) work draws ever shallower, fans of the late chilean novelist and poet are left hungering for whatever wayward morsels still remain. while those eager to devour something as bountiful as *the savage detectives* or *2666* are likely to be left unsated, bolaño's residual writings nonetheless offer a complementary (if not integral) glimpse into his towering and singular body of work. so it is with *the secret of evil*, a collection of 19 mostly unfinished pieces found amongst the files on bolaño's computer following his 2003 death.

ignacio echevarría, spanish critic and bolaño's literary executor, penned a preliminary note to *the secret of evil* that outlines the provenance of the book's contents. despite the undated nature of these orphaned pieces, it appears that bolaño was working on them in the months preceding his death. echevarría offers insight into the often problematic charge of determining which of bolaño's stories or items *had*, in fact, already been completed:

...the inconclusive nature of bolaño's novels and stories makes it difficult to decide which of the unpublished narrative texts should be regarded as finished and which are simply sketches. the task is further complicated by bolaño's progressive radicalization of what i have called his poetics of inconclusiveness. and to make the distinction more difficult still, bolaño rarely began to write a story without giving it a title and immediately establishing a definite tone and atmosphere; his writing, which is always captivating, virtually never stumbles or hesitates.

despite the arduousness of echevarría's attempts to clarify a particular piece's state of completion, the writing in *the secret of evil* never reads as if it were hastily constructed, but rather, at times, simply unfinished. some of the included stories may well have an ambiguous ending, while others leave off in a way that seemingly indicates that they were abandoned pending resumption at a later date.

of the nineteen pieces that compose *the secret of evil*, three have appeared previously in english translation. "vagaries on the literature of doom" (a speech about the state of post-borgesian argentine literature), "sevilla kills me" (an unfinished, if somewhat similarly themed address), and "beach" (progenitor of the "bolaño was once a heroin junkie" speculations since debunked by his wife, as well as by friend and fellow author, enrique vila-matas) were all published in *between parentheses*. as with much of bolaño's writing, the line between fictional creation and autobiographical sketch blur easily, as is evident in "i can't read," a "story" about his son lautaro's humorous antics during bolaño's first return trip to his native chile in nearly two and a half decades. "i can't read" demonstrates a lighter, more playful (and ever self-effacing) bolaño, and is one of the book's stronger pieces, despite it remaining, sadly, forever unfinished.

three of *the secret of evil*'s stories, "the old man of the mountain," "death of ulises," and "the days of chaos"

feature recurrent Bolaño character (and autobiographical alter ego) Arturo Belano, two of which portray him well beyond his heady, itinerant *savage detectives* years. Daniela de Montecristo (of *Nazi Literature* and 2666 fame) makes a brief appearance in her namesake story, "Daniela," wherein she recalls the loss of her virginity at age thirteen. "Scholars of Sodom" (in two versions) imagines v.s. Naipaul upon a visit to Buenos Aires. "Labyrinth" is vaguely evocative of the first part of 2666, "the part about the critics." "Muscles," Echevarría surmises, is "probably the beginning of an unfinished novel, perhaps an early version of *una novelita lumpen*" (a 2002 novella yet to be rendered into English). The collection's title story is amongst the best (despite its brevity) of those selected for inclusion, and offers a seedy, nocturnal milieu that Bolaño was so adept at creating. The most surprising of the stories is "The Colonel's Son," a nightmarish tale wherein the narrator recounts a chilling zombie movie he viewed on television the night before.

The Secret of Evil, quite obviously, will appeal most greatly to those already won over by Bolaño's extraordinary body of work. Neophytes may well find this a difficult collection to make sense of, as the nature of the book lends itself to those long since familiar with the style and themes that characterize the Chilean's masterful fiction. This is most certainly not the place for a newcomer to start, but for the devotee, a subterranean expanse of narrative possibilities and literary what-ifs await.

you're not going to believe this, but last night, at about four a.m., i saw a movie on tv that could have been my biography or my autobiography or a summary of my days on this bitch of a planet. it scared me so fucking shitless that i tell you i just about fell off my chair.

*the three previously published pieces that originally appeared in *between parentheses* were translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer, and the sixteen new to this collection were rendered by Chris Andrews.

Arif Abdurahman says

Komputer Bolano diubek, dan semua tulisan yg tertinggal di dalamnya sudah pasti jadi buku. Beberapa tulisan dalam buku ini sudah banyak yg tersebar di internet, bahkan saya pernah menerjemahkan salah satunya.

Trovato Solo says

A veces leer Roberto Bolaño da la idea que la persona en parte no sabe lo que está haciendo. De impulso, pero también pensando en los diferentes temas de los capítulos del libro, el sujeto se hace la idea que el escritor quiere provocar al lector. [...] Obviamente, incluso con "El secreto del mal" el poeta chileno vaga desinhibido con su imaginación. Como dice el mismo poeta: tal vez es para masturbarse antes de ir a dormir. En la historia del libro algunos capítulos son razonables, otros no guardan alguna relación con la realidad! Hay cuentos que podrían estar relacionados con la realidad del escritor: en relación con su experiencia vivida en el D.F. de México, tierra donde el escritor estudió. Otros temas son destellos de pensamiento, tal vez sólo imaginario, pero donde el autor trae también a su hijo: esto con cuento por parte del nombre real u con lo de su alter ego.

Por fin, hay otros dos conceptos un poco más evidentes que se destacan por el mismo seudónimo Arturo Belano: a veces es una persona que dice u escribe simplemente historias. Mientras el otro concepto puede ser

un fondo el que el pintor hará su diseño: en este caso se destaca la pasión por la *letteratura* y en haber sido un seguidor de Jorge Luis Borges.

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Noel says

Finished this book in the train, from Lloret de Mar back to Barcelona. The day's last train. The train was empty. It was Sunday. (As Bolaño would have put it: "Then he sees himself – and it's as if he's watching a movie, a movie so sad he'd never go to see it.").

All the while, there was an incessant buzzing in my head. Perhaps it was because of too much alcohol. But I choose to interpret it as the sound of Roberto Bolaño spinning in his grave, at 180 rpm. Not sure he would have wanted these "stories" published.

Anyway, a nice post-drinking read for a completist.

Sarah says

Este libro, no lo escribió Bolaño. Escribió sus cuentos y otros textos pero murió antes de publicarles. El editor lo señala en su introducción y justifica sus elecciones. Bueno...

Conocí a Roberto Bolaño con las historias cortas de *Llamadas telefónicas* y quede fascinada. En algunas historias de *El secreto del mal*, encuentro de nuevo esta voz que tanto me gusta, como en "La colonia Lindavista" o "Playa". En otras, es un reencuentro con un Arturo Belano grande, este poeta de los *Detectives salvajes*, desilusionado, siempre desfasado. Y luego, hay otras voces, la de *El hijo del coronel*, que la podría contar Molina a Valentín Arregui (pero un Molina con referencias cinematográficas rebajadas) o como la literatura adapta el cinema (y no al revés), o la de "Bronceado" que queda para mí el cuento mas cruel del libro.

En fin, si algunos relatos me parecieron muy buenos, el libro como tal podría no dejarme mucho recuerdo. Le falta una unidad, que no de tanto la impresión de una recopilación de lo que se pudo sacar del ordenador del autor tras su muerte. Se reconoce el estilo de Bolaño, sí, pero hay obras de él más interesantes (o por lo menos más acabadas).

Jay says

I wonder if Roberto Bolaño might not be the almost perfect writer—the near perfect novelist and the near perfect poet. I can't imagine him writing substandard fiction or inferior poetry. It is not merely his stories and plotting that are engaging and gravitational but he is a master of style, too. He has extended creative language in ways we are only beginning to understand. And that creativity is evident in English translations

as well as in the original Spanish where the impact can be transcendental.

I wonder about Bolaño's talents since *The Secret of Evil* is only, for the most part, collected fragments, short, uncompleted pieces of writings that were left in four files on Bolaño's computer at his death. You would expect the fragments (19 in all) to be in some stage of development in regard to the actual writing rather than polished, needing only story or plot extensions. But the fragments mesmerize as if they were polished wholes and not evolving parts. Reading *The Secret of Evil* is like spending an evening over drinks and dinner with a brilliant friend, finding yourself lost in stimulating and expanding ideas and visions of new worlds and possibilities.

Some of the fragments re-introduce us to old friends of Bolaño's fiction. We meet, for example, Bolaño's alter ego Arturo Belano and his friend Ulises Lima (from *The Savage Detectives*) in several of the stories/fragments, including "The Old Man of the Mountain", "Death of Ulises" and "The Days of Chaos". Or even Bolaño himself in "Colonia Lindavista" as a young man in Mexico or in "I Can't Read" as a father in a return trip to his native Chile.

There are also new or almost new characters in, for example, "Muscles" and "Daniela". In the former, the narrator is a young girl caught up in the life of her brother. In the latter, we are re-introduced to Daniela de Montecristo, "a citizen of the universe", a person we met only briefly in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. And there are several—"The Room Next Door" or "Crimes"—that are at once mysterious and unsettling.

Two of the pieces are reflections on the state of Argentinian and Latin American literature: "Vagaries of the Literature of Doom" and "Sevilla Kills Me". Here the impact is admittedly more esoteric for an audience unfamiliar with Hispanic letters.

Nor are all the pieces fragments. "Labyrinth", one of the longer writings and one of the few previously published, is a complete story. In the first pages Bolaño describes a photograph of eight people and then, after describing the dress and posture of the eight as they appear statically in the photo, he moves them signally and in groups out of the photograph into imagined scenes and situations. It is a breathtaking, whirlwind adventure.

"The Colonel's Son" also appears to be a completed story. Here, Bolaño emerges us in a zombie movie that he has seen on television. The movie was, writes Bolaño, "bad, or the sort we call bad—poor fools that we are—because the actors aren't much good and the director's not much good and the cretinous special effects guys hopeless too." But then he tells us that "it was the most democratic, the most revolutionary film I'd seen in ages." And with that declaration, he hooks the reader for 14 pages.

These kinds of works published after an author's death most often tend to disappoint. They seem positioned by publishers and heirs to milk money from the public—a publisher's con game. *The Secret of Evil* is one of the exceptions to that tendency.

Mike Puma says

I'm increasingly approaching these posthumous publications of Bolaño's work with more and more skepticism. In the preface to this volume, Ignacio Echevarría (the literary executor of Bolaño's estate, and presumably a good, loyal friend who RB trusted with the livelihood of his family), states, "All his narratives,

not just *The Secret of Evil*, seem to be governed by a poetics of inconclusiveness”—that as much seems to be the case as it seems to be an excellent marketing ploy to publish these pieces at their various stages of completion. I prefer to believe the former, but the skeptic in me keeps considering the latter. Whichever the case may be, this is a welcome volume for the ‘completists’ (like me), and probably not the title best recommended to those looking to get a taste of Bolaño at his finest. That said, I’m looking forward to the arrival of *Woes of the True Policeman: A Novel* sometime in November. What follows is the briefest descriptions of the various pieces in this collection, easily skippable, but you should, if you have any sort of curiosity at all, read the description of the piece *Scholars of Sodom*.

Colonia Lindavista—The narrator recalls the apartment he shared with his family in Mexico, when he was just beginning to write and after arriving from Chile.

The Secret of Evil—A necessarily unfinished story, as its first sentence says it must be, in which Joe A. Kelso, a North American journalist, has a clandestine meeting with Sacha Pinsky (an informant?) in a Paris bar over croissants and coffee.

The Old Man of the Mountain—Belano and Lima (remember *The Savage Detectives*?) meet in Mexico City, alienate the Mexican literary establishment, and proceed on their separate trajectories.

The Colonel’s Son—I’ll be Go to Hell. The narrator describes seeing a movie, one which might be biographical or autobiographical, in the wee hours of the morning—a movie of young love on the run and zombies, with no budget, no production skills on display, and little plot. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Bolaño did zombies—his way.

Scholars of Sodom—The narrator reflects on seeing V.S. Naipaul walking determinedly through the streets of Buenos Aires and wondering about the story he’d intended to write on the author to include thoughts on Naipaul’s peculiar willingness to dismiss Argentinean culture due to their historic fascination with and practice of sodomy (then again, it might just be the narrator’s take on the story he didn’t write). Nice. All I’ll say on the matter is that if you haven’t seen Argentinean porn, you might not understand that it (view spoiler)

The Room Next Door—The narrator remembers an overheard conversation from an adjacent hotel room as he stares at a gun aimed at his head.

Labyrinth—A group of friends, literary personages, pose at a table in an outdoor café before wandering off to appear in other photographs, in various regroupings, while the narrator considers what each might be considering beyond the photograph’s frame.

The Vagaries of the Literature of Doom—A previously published speech on the authors who dominate the ‘Argentine canon’ (Arlt, Lamborghini and Soriano), and the author’s decided preference for Borges. Included in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches*, 1998-2003.

Crimes—A young, or not so young, journalist who has two lovers discusses the murder of a young, or not so young, woman with a man she’s just met.

I Can’t Read—Bolaño (not a narrator, as this doesn’t seem to be a story) recalls his first return to Chile with his wife and son, Lautaro, who peed in a pool and taught another child how to approach automatic doors without setting off the opening mechanism; on his second return to Chile, he was attacked en masse by both left- and right-wing authors. Lautaro’s ability to not trigger the door led Bolaño to say:

I can’t remember which writer said that if God was omnipresent, automatic doors should

always be open.

I'll probably never forget that, and beat the thought to death.

Beach—An ex-junkie who's undergoing methadone treatment goes to the beach in Blanes each day and considers the other people who visit and time. Included in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches*, 1998-2003 and characters at the beach may seem familiar to readers of *The Third Reich*.

Muscles—Marta recounts life with her body-builder brother, Enric, his failed romance with her co-worker and ex-close friend who has become bitter about him, and his bringing two young men to their apartment to stay with them. For my money, one of the better, more complete feeling stories.

The Tour—A member of a successful band leaves the group which continues to turn out increasingly successful albums only to resurface decades later. Kind of a yawner.

Daniela—A young woman loses her virginity at an early age, considers telling on the man who deflowered her, and considers her place in the universe, not the world. Daniela de Montecristo made her first appearance in *Nazi Literature in the Americas*.

Suntan—An actress considers fostering another child from a war-torn region of the world and her career.

Death of Ulises—While en route to the Guadalajara Book Fair, our hero, Arturo Belano, aborts his trip while still in Mexico City and, instead, visits the building where his friend, Ulises Lima (aka Mario Santiago) had lived and meets the fat rock band who live next door and claim to be the last of Lima's *disciples*.

When he can finally close his eyes again, he sees his taxi driving at full speed down a busy avenue, while robbers hold up other taxis and passengers die with terrified expressions on their faces. Vaguely familiar gestures and words. Fear. Then he sees nothing and falls asleep the way a stone falls down a well.

This one definitely feels like Bolaño.

The Troublemaker—A young, Spanish poet gets caught up in anti-Iraq War protests and encourages others to express the same feeling.

Sevilla Kills Me—A very brief, humorous speech on who is responsible for what will become the important Latin American literature. Previously printed in *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches*, 1998-2003.

The Days of Chaos—At age 15, Geronimo Belano makes his first trip away from home with friends and without adults and disappears during the Days of Chaos; at age 15, Belano moved from Chile to Mexico City with his family.

Bolaño Lite, recommended for the die hards.

Rafa says

Me resulta imposible dar una calificación inferior a Bolaño, pero solo es recomendable para los arqueólogos

de los que habría podido ser después del 2003.

Fabian says

For the love of God: don't make this your first venture into Bolaño. Here are but scraps decoupage by eager (greedy?) editors that have canonized, rightfully so, the tragic author. But here we see him mimicking the talented Mr. Puig (the brilliant Argentinian) in his movie/zeitgeist insight, in his critical statements, all of which are incredibly beautifully put. He is also infatuated with prolonged lists (well, duh, just recall "The Women" section of "2666," itself almost 266 pages long as a grisly chamber of too true terrors in a form that rivals the Marquis de Sade's) & the art-like criticism of music, art & literature.

Herein gorgeous trains-of-thought which defy a general classification. Are they notes and sketches, or beginnings, middles and ends? The writer has established this device of nonentity, of non-resolution and an omnipresent sense of dread, which may infuriate readers, divide them; but ultimately defines the awful discovery of literary prophecy: the whole point of these snippets, their infinite value, is the fact that Bolaño was writing about his impending annihilation by coming close to his text, breathing into it and from it, then retreading devastatingly far, causing in the reader disbelief, sadness & awe.

We find here the modern day Flannery O'Connor of Latin America. Bolaño's poetics include people and God being inherently cruel, the world a dangerous place. The fear of strangers pervades; and the voices coming from neighboring rooms is by now a motif representing a discovery that, I guess, just cannot be made, cannot occur. Basically, all of it is some sad, hidden defunct but beautiful possibility.

It should be made clear that this is not a collection of short stories, much less a novel. A complete liberty (generous indeed) of publishers, editors made this seem like something it's quite frankly not. Better than the title, a more befitting and less confusing "Notes of Roberto Bolaño" would have sufficed. I'd still read it with equal enthusiasm.

Giuseppe Sirugo says

A volte leggere Roberto Bolaño dà l'idea che la persona non sappia cosa sta facendo. D'impulso, come anche pensando ai diversi temi dei capitoli del libro, lo scrittore rende l'idea che vuole provocare il lettore: ovviamente pure con "El secreto del mal" il poeta cileno vaga disinibito con la sua immaginazione. Come dice lo stesso: forse la sua è una maniera di masturbarsi prima di andare a dormire.

Le storie di alcuni capitoli del libro sono ragionevoli, ma ci sono pure alquanti racconti che non hanno alcun rapporto con la realtà! Storie che potrebbero essere collegate alla realtà dello scrittore, magari relazionate alla sua esperienza vissuta nel DF del Messico, terra nella quale Bolaño si trasferì in giovane età per studiare e crearsi l'avvenire di scrittore. Mentre gli altri argomenti dei paragrafi potrebbero essere scorci di pensiero, tipo flashback della propria coscienza, forse sono frammenti solo immaginari, ma dove il medesimo autore porta con sé anche suo figlio: cosa che narra sia col nome di battesimo come anche con l'alter ego.

Per concludere, si possono distinguere altri due concetti, caratterizzati dallo stesso pseudonimo Arturo Beleno: a volte come persona dice, o semplicemente scrivere storie. Mentre l'altro aspetto ha un fondo che potrebbe essere paragonato alla superficie sulla quale il pittore progetterà il suo disegno: ben distinto per la passione che ha avuto per la letteratura e l'essere stato un seguace di Jorge Luis Borges.

Michael says

Leer a Bolano es un placer y dos tristezas. El primero se explica solo. Las dos segundas necesitan unas lineas: la primera, es saber que jamas voy a poder escribir 4 lineas como el (esta es una tristeza mas bien dura, cruel); la segunda, es la pena de saber que, cuando termine que leer todo lo que ha escrito, ya no va a haber mas Bolano. Quedara releer lo leido (ya lo hice con "Los Detectives Salvajes")

Leia en la introduccion al libro que no se sabe, en la mayoria de los cuentos, si Bolano los habia terminado de escribir o no. Fueron archivos encontrados en su computadora. Es increible pensar que tal vez los cuentos no estaban terminados y sin embargo se dejan leer. Esto tiene que ver con el estilo de Bolano: sus obras son una cebolla perfecta: capa tras capa descubre uno algo nuevo (un nuevo terror, una nueva premonicion, una nueva puerta abierta a una nada perfectamente delineada, salvaje, o un conjunto de tantas posibilidades como lectores).

En algunos de los cuentos (o de los ensayos -conte dos-) todavia se encuentran un par de lineas del humor irreverente de Bolano. Un cuento, de hecho ("El Hijo del Coronel", quizas el unico cuento con final) es todo el un relato de humor, un excelente guion de una pesima pelicula de zombies. Pero hasta aqui lo hace cabalgar Bolano a uno a traves del relato (que sigue?)

La advertencia con Bolano es siempre la misma: esperar un final solo llevara a una decepcion.

Jim says

He lived only fifty years, did Roberto Bolaño, but he left us with not a few mysteries, of which The Secret of Evil is only one. And what is this book? It is nothing less than a number of stories Bolaño had left on his computer when he died. And are these stories finished? Are **any** of them finished? I don't know.

But one thing I do know: This Chilean author who lived much of his life in exile had the gift. Even his fragments are full of excitement and, yes, mystery. One story, which I had read once before, probably in **The New Yorker**, is nothing but a series of suppositions about a number of literary people appearing in a captioned group photograph. Some of them, most notably Julia Kristeva, are real people, but Bolaño still has fun treating them as fictional characters, just as he does V S Naipaul in another fragment.

Hell, I'll take a fragment by Bolaño any day over most finished works by others, no matter what their reputation may be.

Allan MacDonell says

It's like when Jimi Hendrix died, or Tupac for instance, and album after posthumous album of material in

various degrees of fragment and finished work was scraped together and sold: You were happy with what you could get, and *The Secret of Evil* has enough of Roberto Bolaño's raw alchemy to make the ardent Bolaño admirer glad it's here, and wish again that the author still was too.

Lee says

The completism instinct is good for literary capitalists yet crappy for those compelled to read an author's entire output. Completism is the highest compliment for a writer but risks insulting the reader. Completists at worst are head-over-heels lovers spurned for loving too much (punished for revealing hyper-thumping hearts). I'd love to see New Directions combine all the recent slim Bolano volumes into a single burly *Cuentos Collected*. ND did offer an Xmas sale of three hardbacks for \$40 (a bargain I went for) but an omnibus for \$24.95 would be awesome for future readers. Regardless, completist suckers like me gonna quaff the dregs, hoping for one last fresh taste of that ol' Bolano magic, even when three of these stories already appeared in *Between Parentheses* and goodreaders (see Mr. Puma's review) more than adequately issued unequivocal caveat emptors. If the masterpiece (2666) is a lake concealed by a forest of pines (the evergreen polyphonies of *The Savage Detectives*) and twisted elms (*Distant Star*, *By Night in Chile*, *Nazi Literature in the Americas*, etc), these hard drive scrapings are, at most, the underbrush, or maybe the unremembered dreams of unhealthy patches of moss that at best share but rarely display a common molecular composition as the pines and lake. What I mean is: in the foreword, I wish Bolano's Max Brod (Ignacio Echevarria) didn't compare these to Kafka's late-life aphorisms (*Blue Octavo Notebooks*), which compress and suggest polysignificances (self, society, theology, etc) and seem timeless ("a cage went in search of a bird"). (Kafka is maybe the only writer whose work-related to-do lists I might rush out to acquire, although admittedly I don't own *Franz Kafka: The Office Writings*-- at least not yet.) Bits in here seemed promising before they ran off the rails -- I might have loved the zombie story if it'd been fleshed out -- or they seem like very early drafts, or drafts long ago abandoned (ie, written well before not yet completing 2666). Other than "Sevilla Kills Me," this line ("I'm an ornithological ignoramus, except when it comes to parrots"), and a great description of a dirty-yellow sky like a "graveyard adrift," I wasn't getting what I want to get from Bolano -- ie, "supply plus demand plus magic" (see the Amalfitano section of 2666). There's little magic in this one, and ultimately that's the secret of this one's evil. Supply + demand + incomplete dregs + repeats = meh. A very generous three stars only because of my love for the author and the publisher. No, sorry -- I'm actually gonna give this two stars, which feels like a slur but also feels accurate and respects fully realized books I've deemed fair to middling (or a little better).
