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# Arturo Belano and the Storybook War

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### **Arturo Bolaño and the Storybook War**

I spent my final semester of college counting down the hours, minutes and seconds until I walked across the stage and could call myself a graduate. But once the four-hour drive from Philadelphia to central Connecticut was completed, I had to settle into a much different reality. I hadn't lived at home in eight years. Every one of my friends was in New York or D.C. or some far-flung place that was horribly inconvenient to visit. With little to do besides my mind-numbingly dull 9 to 5, I approached my bookshelf with a new sense of awe. Finally I had time for the big ones, the books that I had picked up dreaming that I would one day have time to read.

I started with *2666*, Roberto Bolaño's sprawling tale of five intertwining stories, each arc drawn inexorably towards Santa Theresa, Mexico: a thinly disguised Ciudad Juárez serving as the novel's dark and awesome Charybdis. Though the book meanders through its first three parts, the fourth, "The Part about the Crimes," is a gripping and violent affair. Its pounding drumbeat of clinical descriptions of sexual brutality and murder captured my attention. The countless crime-scenes that paced the narrative structure were nearly all that I could bear, until, after 300 pages, Part Five began. "The Part about the Crimes" was the hazing that I had to endure to realize the might that Bolaño wielded with his pen. Those gripping passages of *2666* ensnared me in a powerful spell compelling me to collect every one of Bolaño's books and to read nearly every word that Bolaño wrote in his short life.

Bolaño, as an author, is fascinated by the intersection of fiction and reality. His works are largely autobiographical and feature recurring characters, including one similarly named Arturo Bolaño who searches across the Senora desert for a long lost poet in *The Savage Detectives*. The rest of his characters are often writers themselves, based off Bolaño's friends and accomplices, each on their own literary quests. Often they are met with disappointment and struggle. *Amulet* describes the isolation of Auxilio Lacouture, the "Mother of Mexican Poetry," during the

government's occupation of the national university; *By Night in Chile* lists the last memories of a priest and literary critic who integrated himself with Pinochet's fascist government; *The Third Reich* describes a board-game strategist's descent into madness while trying to find an unbeatable sequence of maneuvers. Each tale features a writer looking for meaning in their lives. In turn, these literary searches give meaning to Bolaño's fictions in ways that parallel reality.

Bolaño deftly uses this junction of fiction, literature, and reality to create an honest depiction of our mutual human brokenness. The sometimes-fantastic quality to his characters' loneliness and disappointment rings true because it mirrors our own searches for inspiration, clarity, or some modicum of ephemeral happiness. Halfway through the summer, with only a few pages of Bolaño left, I came across a story called "Literature + Illness = Illness." I realized just how seriously Bolaño took that junction when I read: *books are paths that lead nowhere except to the loss of self, and yet they must be followed and the self must be lost...*\*

I knew then that I had to drag myself out of Bolaño's universe. I could cope with the beauty of his stories, but not with the all-too-real sense of loss.

With this in mind, I started my second journey: two classic Civil War narratives. I had always salivated when I saw the big gleaming editions of Bruce Catton's *Army of the Potomac Trilogy* and Shelby Foote's *The Civil War: A Narrative* in bookstore windows. Though neither meets our hyper-cynical modern notions of how history should operate, the trilogies are timeless examinations of the War that stretched across five nation-defining Aprils.

I began with Catton; his was shorter, after all, and I had found a nice red hardcover set at a used bookstore in mid-May. In those thick pages, Catton focused on the struggles of the Army of the Potomac: the Union Army that chased Robert E. Lee around Virginia for the better portion

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\* Roberto Bolaño, *The Insufferable Gaucho*, trans. Chris Andrews (New York: New Directions, 2010), 144.

of four years. Catton's trilogy captured most historical details and shone when describing the generals' personalities. From the Napoleonic McClellan to the unsure Burnside, Catton brought the main Union players to life. But as I read the description of Hooker's Army, looking out across the Rappahannock towards Chancellorsville with its battle flags streaming in the summer breeze, I began to question Catton's overall tone. I became annoyed by the morality with which Catton judged every event, from the overly somber tones after defeats to the unrelenting derision of Grant. I appreciated the narrative with its colorful depictions, but I resented the way Catton passed judgment while presenting himself as an objective onlooker.

I was thus apprehensive when I cracked the spine of Shelby Foote's first volume. Foote is much more highly regarded than Catton, but I worried when I read the preface and learned that Foote had been inspired more by epic poetry than by the military histories of his day. He wrote that he wouldn't provide footnotes or citations and that his work was thorough and based on legitimate sources. The basis for this, I suppose, was a matter of trust.

Foote's narrative didn't just tell one story – it told them all. It approached the war from both sides and from all fronts, tackling everything from the minor skirmishes in the deserts of western Texas to the naval battles on the high seas and the political challenges that wracked both sides. I soon realized that it wasn't history like Catton, or anyone else I was familiar with. Rather Foote's trilogy was a tradition passed-on, a genesis story, the Union Odyssey or an American Aeneid (a comparison aided by the plentiful Homeric epithets: the "bullet-headed" Sheridan comes to mind). As I plowed and sometimes slogged through page after countless page, I found myself captivated by the stories that Foote wove around and through important historical figures. I began to see generals less as historical persons and more as intimate, detailed characters, complete with weaknesses and strengths of all varieties.

This was history, I realized, but this was the storybook version. Foote's story of the Civil War belonged alongside the stories of the Knights of the Round Table more than it belonged next to *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Foote blurred the lines between history and embellishment with such aplomb that I couldn't help but believe that his descriptions of undocumented events were somehow based in reality. Entire conversations emerged from a fictional abyss to become important components of Foote's history.

Once again, I found myself at the familiar intersection of fiction and reality. And as I read the last of Foote's 1.2 million words and pressed the back cover of *Volume 3* shut, I could not help but think of Bolaño. Bolaño and Foote, through completely different methods, created reality out of fiction. Bolaño accomplished this by dragging me into his spiraling universe, a fiction informed by the great losses of his generation of Latin American writers. Foote instead swept me up in a wave of passion until I was lost in a country populated by courageous men, and could not separate history from fiction. Fiction and reality are blurred in their works, perhaps because fiction often seems mundane and reality, like war itself, is rarely comprehensible. The greatest storytellers knew this truth when they huddled around fires, seeking shelter from the cold, reciting odes to their fur-clad compatriots. Our great storytellers still grasp this truth.

I read more books that summer, but few stories matched the intensity of those by Roberto Bolaño and Shelby Foote. Or perhaps something different had occurred. Perhaps I had lost myself at the crossroads of fiction, literature and reality, but maybe I lost it, *in order to find it again, or to find something, whatever it may be – a book, an expression, a misplaced object – in order to find anything at all, a method, perhaps, and, with a bit of luck, the new, which had been there all along.*\*

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\* Bolaño, 144.

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