

The Devil of the Provinces

Juan Cárdenas

Lizzie Davis, Translator

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In Juan Cárdenas's novel *The Devil of the Provinces*, a man returns to his rural hometown, encountering questions with no ready answers.

After losing his job abroad, a biologist has no choice but to return to Colombia and accept a position as a temporary substitute teacher at an all-girls high school. The longer he stays, though, the more he finds that he still has much to learn about how race, class, and colonialism have intertwined in a web that he can never understand and will never escape from.

For the prodigal biologist, home is both familiar and alien. He returns to a long-neglected town that still holds on to its traditions despite cosmetic improvements and extravagant lip service from politicians. Every place he goes, from the local museum to the hacienda where he attends a party with old friends, has an element of danger and anticipation: a sense that anything could happen and that no one could stop it.

The biologist feels adrift for many reasons, including his lack of prospects, his divorce, and the unsolved murder of his younger brother. He cannot help but think there must be more to life than what he has seen thus far. Maybe a grand plan could explain where he came from and where he is going.

But the scientist's attempts to draw back the curtain and uncover the truth lead nowhere. Closure is elusive, and he is no superhero swooping in to bring justice to his family. He is just a man making the best of his limited resources.

The Devil of the Provinces is a sedate novel that presents its hero with a nigh unsolvable mystery.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (September / October 2023)

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