

Buried Treasure.

Sven Axelrad.

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Sven Axelrad's debut novel, *Buried Treasure* (2023), presents an at times whimsical, at times harrowing, story about names and how the living view and treat the dead. Though allegorical and humorous in some of its approaches to storytelling, the novel is also anchored in some very gritty and realistic depictions of death, bodily decay, and sex, leading to some tensions between the easy-going, largely jovial narrative voice and the often-uncomfortable subject matter broached during the course of the plot. Axelrad often manages to iron out these strains in the narrative and on the reader's credulity by presenting a fast-paced, engaging story, though some gaps and ambiguities remain.

The novel begins *in medias res* in a town called Vivo, when the reader meets Mateus, the local graveyard keeper, his dog named God, and Novo, a young beggar girl whom Mateus has decided to take on as his apprentice. The names of the characters and of the town are immediately noticeable for being unusual: Latinate and somewhat biblical, they point to a few of the overarching concerns of the novel, including a consideration of life ("vivo" in Latin) and theological—even eschatological—issues. In fact, Axelrad has great fun playing with names throughout the novel, and this is later revealed to be more than merely an affectation or authorial tic, as naming comes to play a pivotal role in the plot of *Buried Treasure*. Mateus, it turns out, suffers from undiagnosed dyslexia, and with his eyesight degenerating in old age, he has started burying some bodies in the wrong graves. This misalignment between bodies and their tombstones has led to the ghosts of the recently deceased accumulating in the Treasury, the name of Vivo's cemetery, unable to move on to any putative afterlife. After Mateus also dies unexpectedly

close to the start of the novel, Novo (Latin for "new", significantly enough) must try to fix his mistakes while also establishing a working relationship with the loyal-if-irascible God.

Whether all of the games with names are successful is a bit of an issue: to paraphrase Terry Pratchett, whose *Johnny and the Dead* (1993) may have been an influence on Axelrad's novel, it takes a certain kind of mind to notice that "dog" is a palindrome of "god", but also a certain kind of weird sensibility to find this coincidence particularly significant. The novel does not seem to *do* much with this palindrome, for instance, though it does serve as an early hint of Mateus's dyslexia. In a more generally irritating way, there is a certain aimlessness to some of the novel's whimsicality. Although the jokes, puns, and digressions can be quite entertaining, they often seem at odds with the more philosophical and metaphysical preoccupations of the novel, as well as the sobering reality of rape, necrophilia, and necrophagy, all of which appear in some guise in the novel. Axelrad has a light touch in telling the story, but this sometimes leads to him not quite coming to grips with these issues.

The novel also contains some interesting intertextual echoes, mostly to the works of South American authors but also to other twentieth-century and contemporary authors. One might expect a "magical realist" like the Colombian Gabriel García Márquez to be foregrounded here due to the nature of *Buried Treasure*, yet, though García Márquez is alluded to, the main interlocutor ends up being the Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño: Novo even sleeps with a copy of Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* underneath her head as a pillow. Making Bolaño so central to the novel (*The Savage Detectives* appears numerous times, both as a physical object and as an intertext) seems a somewhat idiosyncratic choice, in fact, given that novel's "visceral realism" (the style and name of its central group of poet-protagonists, though also a good description of its own stylistic features) and its clear grounding in a recognizable South American context.

The lack of specificity in *Buried Treasure's* setting is one of the main issues with the novel. Vivo is clearly an imaginary town, which is all good and well, but difficulties arise when trying to figure out whether this is supposed to be a South American or other Spanish-speaking location, with character's having names like Alejandro, Catalina, Felip, etc., or whether this is a mug's game, and the setting is completely imaginary: an "invisible city", to allude to the title of Italo Calvino's influential novel about imaginary conurbations. The novel's philosophical and metaphysical concerns mostly

outweigh the particularity of context or setting, which brings to mind the questions around J. M. Coetzee's ostensible turning away from Apartheid realities in the 1980s in works like *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Foe* (1986)—a turning away from the South African situation for which Coetzee was often condemned at home, and which led to considerations about whether an author has a responsibility to reflect directly on the lived reality of his or her contemporary society.

Whether or not such an obligation exists, Axelrad's novel does seem to suffer from too much free-floating, contextless insubstantiality, particularly given the links to 'real world' novels and figures in the text, though the latter are rarely referred to by name. The 'rules' of Axelrad's fabular creation also feel too pick-and-mix and *ad hoc*: ghosts exist, and are capable of certain corporeal interventions, but not others; the main antagonist in the novel, a kind of metaphysical serial killer referred to as The Shadow/The Stabber/Mick Jagger (a long story!), is able to act in some supernatural ways, but not consistently so; and there are several other moments of *deus ex machina* that seem unconvincing or, at least, unearned via the logic of the story. To return to Pratchett for a moment, Axelrad's novel at times strains the notion of what Sir Terry defined as "narrative causality", or the idea that any properly told story needs to be internally consistent, even if it contains elements of the fantastical or the fabulous.

That said, the novel is still often hugely entertaining, and its heart is in the right place: there is wisdom to be found here in a re-evaluation of the way we view the dead and the role that memory and memorialization can play in dignifying those who have gone before. Axelrad's narrative voice is also compelling, witty, and urbane. He is an exciting new voice on the South African literary scene, and one can only hope that his writing will continue to develop in interesting, idiosyncratic directions.

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