

The Savage Detectives

By Roberto Bolaño
(Picador)

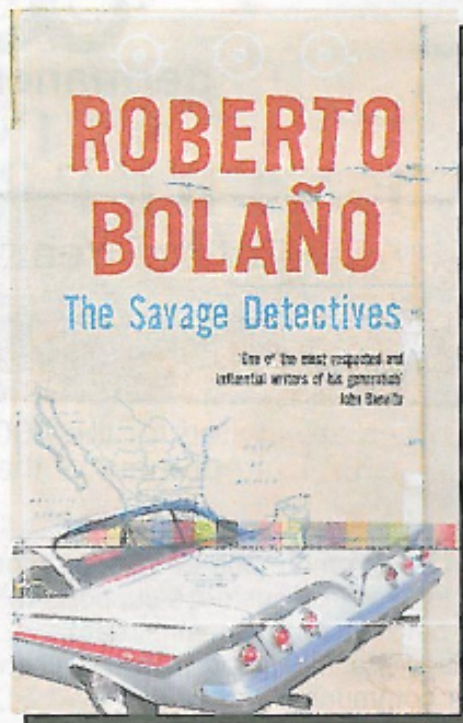
I HAD REALLY been looking forward to reading this book after all the hubbub about Roberto Bolaño over the previous 12 months.

The Chilean author was hailed as the literary discovery of the year, if not the decade, and accolades such as 'genius', 'giant' and 'legend' rained down from the critics.

Thus, with this book in my hand I felt assured of an excellent read, even though at the same time I expected to be disappointed after all the hype and anticipation. And while overall I would tend to agree with the praise, there was a touch of disappointment too.

The Savage Detectives reads like a documentary of a Mexican poetry/literature movement. In following the threads of an intricate, deeply coloured tapestry, we trace the twists and turns of the so-called Visceral Realists, a Mexican branch of the Surrealist art movement.

The first part of the story begins in Mexico City in 1975, where a certain Garcia Madero dutifully records daily diary entries about his way into the titular group of artists. The second, and heftiest, part of the book is delivered as short interviews with a range of people that either have had some-



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thing to do with the group, or in some way have come in touch with its members.

The interviews more or less tie together, and while reading them I felt as if I was laying a jigsaw where the picture that develops constantly shifts, like a kaleidoscope. Sometimes different people tell of the same event, but not necessarily in order, which gives a sense of discovery akin to that of a detective novel, urging you on with intrigue.

However, one problem that stood out for me was the language which, although engaging, skilful and supple, doesn't really seem to suit the arts territory which it proclaims to cover. I think that perhaps reading the book in the original Spanish would really tell if this was a concern for the author.

Nevertheless, I was constantly struck by the notion that Bolaño was telling a very personal story, if an embellished one. The fact that one of the two leaders of the group is a Chilean named Arturo Belano surely connects the author quite directly with the story itself, so to me it would have seemed more natural that the language would somehow have followed suit.



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