

Anyone for menace?

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Alvaro Enrigue

SUDDEN DEATH

Translated by Natasha Wimmer
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A midday game of tennis is in progress, in Renaissance Rome, between an Italian painter and a Spanish poet. Both have hangovers; neither can recall the events of the previous evening that have led to this duel fought with racquet and ball.

On February 28, 1525, a tortured and mutilated emperor lies in his cell dreaming of a dog. He is a victim of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, in what was once his land; he can remember when his people welcomed their conquerors, that small, sea-weary crew, with an extravagant array of gifts, starting with a solid gold sun and a solid silver moon. The conquistadors, in return, present their future victims with a bracelet of glass beads.

Never mind that, though: let Alvaro Enrigue's *Sudden Death* tell you instead – in its jumpy way, in chapters seldom more than a few pages long – about Pope Pius IV's last banquet with two fellow priest-politicians, in the loggia of the Palazzo Colonna in Rome, when "firedrained down on the navel of Catholicism". Another gift changes hands: a tennis ball. It is stuffed with the hair of the executed Anne Boleyn, and by this stage in the novel the reader already knows how it has ended up so far from home. Indeed, it is soon to come into the possession of that tennis-playing painter: Caravaggio.

And now back to the tennis match – the game of "real tennis" that is. Caravaggio's opponent is the writer Francisco de Quevedo, seconded by his patron the Duke of Osuna; a certain great Italian mathematician is also present as the painter's second. Other supporters include the models for Martha and Mary Magdalene, identifiable from such features as a crooked middle finger and "the most defiant pair of tits the history of art". "The artist . . . hadn't

twisted reality to suit the biblical tale, he had done the opposite." Enrigue strikes what sound like the right erudite notes while adjusting the facts to his liking: Thomas More is said here to have been canonized in the sixteenth century, which is a few hundred years too early. More's name comes up in connection with Vasco de Quiroga, the Spanish bishop who applied ideas from *Utopia* to a conquered patch of the New World. The ideas happen to fit nicely with pre-existing arrangements, but credit is claimed all the same. And so a further narrative strand is introduced.

Half the fun of this book lies in its bounciness – it is, in the best possible sense, all over the place, jumping from the Aztec citadel of Tenochtitlán to Spain to Rome then back again. From Cortés to the tennis court, from the courts of Spain, France and the Holy Roman Empire, it makes a narrative virtue of history's ricochets. The Aztecs, for example, have their ball games, too; Cortés witnesses one, in the company of a man whose head he will later have displayed on a spike.

First published in Spain in 2013, *Sudden Death* is now thoroughly aware that it is a



From Guillaume de la Perrière's *Le Théâtre de bons engins*, 1539

novel in translation (by Natasha Wimmer who gamely captures the deadpan tone, and most enjoyably manages a neat round of interlinguistic puns). It drops the mock-historical act from time to time in favour of some email correspondence (about itself) and present-day anecdotes about meeting museum curators and Irish nuns.

It is also studded with Aztec proper names, as well as aristocratic and ecclesiastical titles, amid its miniature disquisitions on the Renaissance and the Baroque, the Counter-

Reformation and the New World. At times, it seems to acknowledge the danger of incoherence. Towards the end, the narrator claims: "As I write, I don't know what this book is about. It's not exactly about a tennis match". Yet the next page offers reflections on what novels can do, making this a modest defence of fiction, and at least one conviction about this particular novel: "I know that as I wrote it I was angry because the bad guys always win".

By this point, that tennis match between a Spaniard and an Italian has become quite gripping, with its myriad changes of fortune, and the emergence of information about the players, their seconds and supporters, as well as that inglorious night before. Enrigue describes the match game by game, setting it in a courtly commentary of quotations from contemporary dictionaries and the like. "One player defends and the other attacks, then vice versa", observes the *Diccionario de autoridades* of 1726. "If there is a tie, a chase will decide the defender and the attacker in the third round, which is called sudden death." Given Caravaggio's murky reputation and uncertain fate, this detail seems like fair warning about what is to come, even if the violence is, for the most part, regulated by the rules of the game. Alvaro Enrigue's version of real tennis nonetheless remains brutal enough: if the tennis fails to settle the players' differences there is always swordplay.

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