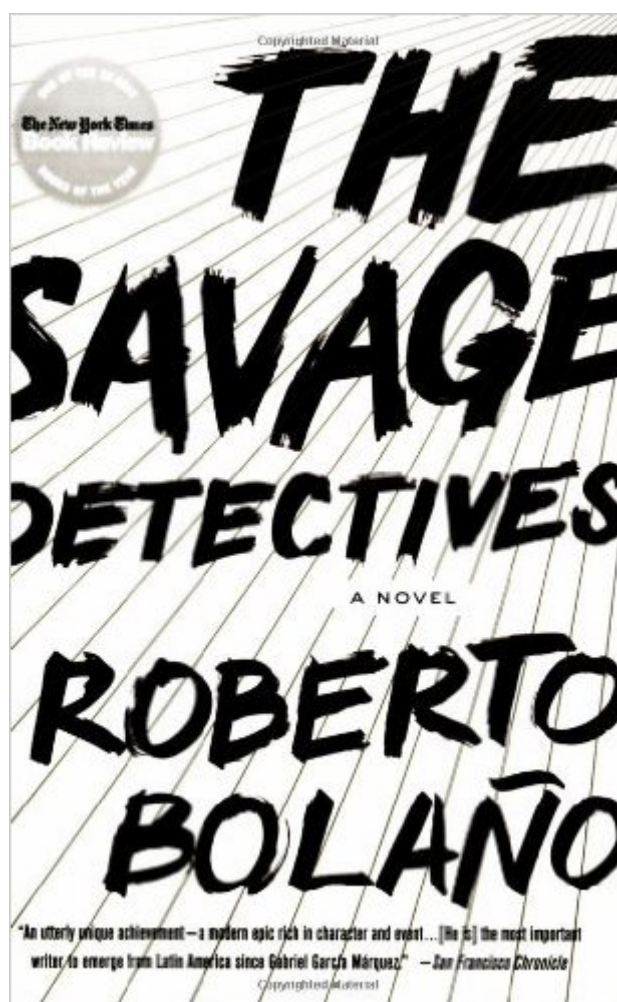


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The Savage Detectives: A Novel



Synopsis

National Bestseller In this dazzling novel, the book that established his international reputation, Roberto Bolaño tells the story of two modern-day Quixotes--the last survivors of an underground literary movement, perhaps of literature itself--on a tragicomic quest through a darkening, entropic universe: our own. *The Savage Detectives* is an exuberant, raunchy, wildly inventive, and ambitious novel from one of the greatest Latin American authors of our age.

Book Information

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Average Customer Review: 3.6 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (175 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

First, a note to those readers who found the book slow: well, it is and it isn't. The first part moves along at a fairly fast clip and ends in the midst of a car chase. The very long second part, called "The Savage Detectives," presents forty-odd narrators, some recurring, some not, who take us through about thirty years of life, love, madness, poetry, children lost in caves, Latin American poets lost in Africa, and people generally (even savagely!) lost in their own lives. About fifty pages into this section, I too was getting annoyed, wondering where all this could possibly be going and what the point could possibly be. Then, the slow accretion of narratives and themes began to reveal the grand melancholy at the multi-layered heart of this brilliant book, and I was enthralled. The novel's third and final section is brief and brutal. I'll avoid spoilers here, but the ending conveys an inevitable and exhausted disillusionment only comparable, to my mind, to that of *Sentimental Education*, although Bolaño is perhaps not quite so cynical as Flaubert. Or is he? His poets seem to be either anti-heros in spite of themselves, or sincere and manipulative poseurs; and yet, for as much as we may know about them, some mysteries about these characters simply cannot be solved. Formally, the book challenges our expectations of a novel (and although Bolaño is compared most often to

Borges, whose work and image he praised in interviews, formally he reminds me more of Julio Cortazar, although without quite the same ludic bravado as in, say, *Hopscotch*); thematically, it challenges ideals we may hold for art, especially if we are artists. And if my review makes *The Savage Detectives* sound like a long and somber read, trust me--it is exuberant and heartbreaking in its pursuit of both comedy and tragedy.

Well into *The Savage Detectives*, one character says to the other: "The visual arts are ultimately incomprehensible. Or they're so comprehensible that nobody, first and foremost myself, will accept the most obvious reading of them." Substitute "written" for the "visual" arts and you get a taste for what you are in for in this book: a combination of wisdom, puzzle and in-joke. I loved the book and am now hunting down other Bolano novels. *The Savage Detectives* is not easy - two sections of conventional narrative set in Mexico about our poet heroes are split by nearly a 400 page section of oral history, almost like witness statements, from those who encountered them over the subsequent 20 years. The knowledge gained in this intervening section colours and adds a sense of melancholy when the initial narrative resumes. An obvious reference point is the film *Y Tu Mama Tambien* because of its Mexican setting, its young protagonists on a road trip, and the ephemeral nature of youth's passions (and lots of sex). While the novel's structure is challenging, it holds together because the voices are compelling. The characters ramble, digress, talk your ear off and engage in bawdy, violent and colourful adventures. There is a sense of urgency about their testimony, as though their experiences had to be recorded. While our picture of our main protagonists is never complete, often contradictory, there is a real power here. Bolano wrestles with representing the fullness of a life, while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of ever doing so. We may be the centre of our own individual universes but in the end we are just dust in the wind. This is a book to read at a good steady pace - too fast will mean you will not savour the words and small clues left along the way, too slow and you will lose track of the multiple threads. One of the best books I've read in the last five years.

Bolano is a master storyteller. Best book I've read in years. **THE STORY:** Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano are the young leaders of literary movement they call the Visceral Realists, think BaaderMeinhoff Literary Brigade. The movement is part-gag -- a sendup of Andre Breton's surrealist movement and its "purges" -- but also an attack on the old guard of Latin American literature, people like Octavio Paz (who they jokingly/seriously threaten to kidnap) and Garcia Marquez. They show up with their teenage cohorts at literary events and heckle the sacred cows as the old men of letters

attempt to recite their poetry! They threaten their critics with duels (as any self respecting man of letters must do)! Some of the Visceral Realists don't even appear to read! The motley group of Mexico City street kids -- Ulises, Arturo, Lupe, Garcia Madero, Maria and Angelica Font, Luscious Skin, San Estifanio -- are bonded by their belief in poetry, the poets life, their alienation, and their youth. The story follows this gang from their beginnings in 1970s Mexico City through their wanderings throughout the world (Spain, France, West and Central Africa, Latin America, San Diego) and into the 1990s. The realization that the life of a poet is both the happiest and the saddest thing. And it finds Arturo, Ulises, Garcia Madero, and Lupe lost in the Sonora Desert running from an angry pimp and searching for a lost poet, the first Visceral Realist, a woman who disappeared into the desert some forty years before. Oh yeah, there's a lot of sex and drugs, some violence, poignancy and irreverency. And there's a lot of poetry. I can't recommend it enough, especially for those who believe that books can offer more than entertainment, for those who dream the naive and true dream that books and the people who write them are revolutionary.

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