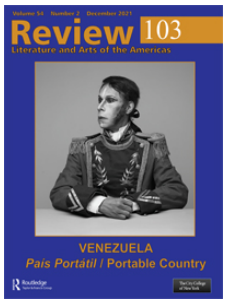

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The Sky Weeps for Me

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"We seek out the novel," says Mexican writer Isaí Moreno, "because we encounter something there that we cannot find in another setting." Arguably, this is as true for those who write novels as for those who read them. In *The Sky Weeps for Me,* the first of two Inspector Morales procedurals (the second has yet to appear in English), Cervantes prizewinner Sergio Ramírez seeks moral splendor amidst the vast crime scene that is contemporary Nicaraguan life, while portraying the day to day lives of his country's ordinary people with both tenderness and literary mastery. But it is less Ramírez's womanizing protagonist than the female characters in this action-packed novel who bend the arc of the plot toward justice and who distinguish this as perhaps the first feminist *novela negra* ever written.

Inspector Dolores Morales (whose name means *moral suffering*) is called by his old comrade in arms, Deputy Inspector Bert Dixon, to help investigate an abandoned luxury yacht and the related disappearance and presumed murder of a young woman. What ensues is a deliciously convoluted and exquisitely assembled police procedural that is so densely populated that it requires a dramatis personae, thankfully provided in the front matter. Delivering to readers all the violence, systemic corruption, drug cartels, and personal failure that we expect from noir, the novel's intertextual elements also place it firmly in the postmodern detective genre. Ramírez, however, allows no more bullets to fly than

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necessary, and gore and torture are more alluded to than shown. Instead, he focuses on character development, demonstrating how a motley band of ex-Sandinista fighters becomes a semi-official "A-Team," solving the case armed with only their loyalty to each other, a willingness to skirt official protocols, and their street-smart savvy.

We come to know the murdered woman, Sheila Marenco, only through the places and people she has left behind, fragments and snapshots of a broken life. The victim's blurriness allows her to stand in for all the disappeared under the Somoza and Ortega dictatorships, as well as those victims of the epidemic rape, kidnapping, murder, and domestic violence that make Latin America one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman. Inspector Morales has only one leg, the other having been amputated during the revolution, and this ill-fitting artificial member is an elegant metaphor for his losses both as a revolutionary and as a man.

Morales's character flaws are thrown into relief by the virtues of a cast of strong female characters: Doña Sofía, the National Police office cleaning lady who contributes crucial analysis and puts her life on the line to gather evidence; Fanny, the Inspector's married lover, who collaborates with Doña Sofía and somehow gets her husband to help out, too; Police Commissioner Violeta María Barquero, who steps in to protect the investigation from corrupt officials; and Doña Cristina, the victim's grieving mother, whose unshakeable moral compass ultimately serves as both inspiration and guide to Morales when he sees that he must go outside the law to ensure that justice is done.

The translation by Leland H. Chambers, who died in 2017, with publisher Bruce R. McPherson, does a workmanlike job of capturing the atmosphere of the novel, though it suffers from a fair scattering of awkward choices. Nevertheless, readers will find this action-packed novel to be a fresh, engaging example of high literary noir that also informs about America's role in Nicaragua's calamity. Ramírez, Ortega's former Vice President, renounced political life in 1996 but he maintains a laser-focus on his homeland, criticizing the errors of the Sandinista government of which he was a part by turning his moral suffering into literature while still living and writing in Nicaragua. While no good novel has a didactic purpose, it can still inform by showing, just as political fictions can kill by deceiving. Can literature offer a cure? In *The Sky Weeps for Me*, Ramírez suggests that if systemic corruption and cartel-related violence is to be stemmed in Nicaragua and elsewhere, it will be because women lead the way with their physical courage, intelligence, and moral splendor.

Dorothy Potter Snyder writes fiction and essays and translates literature from Spanish. Her translations have appeared in The Sewanee Review, Exile Quarterly, World Literature in Translation, *and* Two Lines Journal. *She contributes to* Public Seminar, Reading in Translation, *and* Asymptote, *and translated Mexican writer Mónica Lavín's collection* Meaty Pleasures *(2021). She lives in Hillsborough, NC.*