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## An Argentinian Masterpiece

Antonio Di Benedetto's 'Zama' is a superb novel about a brooding official trapped in a backwater of the Spanish empire.

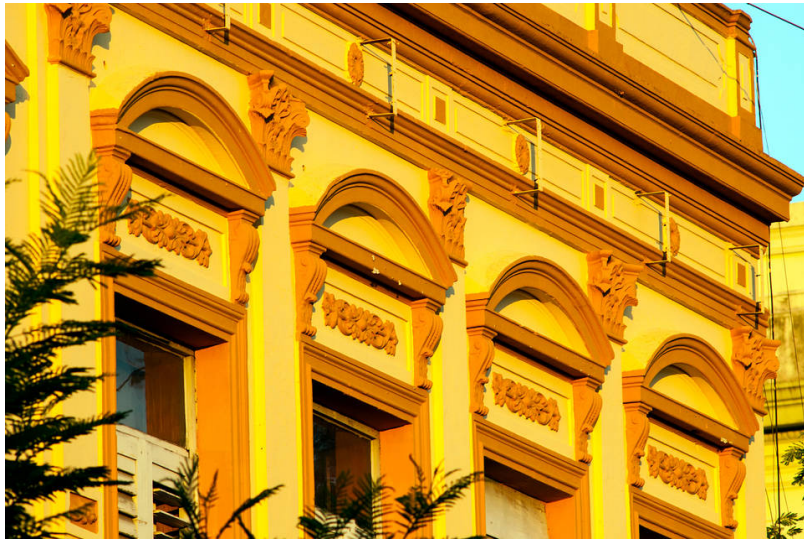


PHOTO: ALAMY

By **NATHANIEL POPKIN**

Sept. 16, 2016 4:16 p.m. ET

**Antonio Di Benedetto's** mesmerizing "Zama"—first published in 1956 and now translated in English for the first time—is a modern novel that refutes a central tenet of modernity and a historical novel that rejects the romance of the past.

The protagonist is Diego de Zama, a tortured legal counselor to the governor of Paraguay at the end of the 18th century.

Trapped in the backwater city of Asunción, Don Diego hungers for an assignment in Buenos Aires, closer to his wife, Marta, and his sons. Of Spanish blood but South American birth—an *americano*—Don Diego is a second-tier white within the Spanish colonial hierarchy. His future depends entirely on the whim of the crown. The novel tracks his descent into idle despair as he waits endlessly for bureaucratic deliverance.

Di Benedetto's prose, at once methodical and otherworldly, captures the grim humor of Don Diego's plight. He goes to wait by the river, where he imagines that an incoming ship will carry Marta, or at least a letter from her. After years of separation, "I needed physical love as badly as I needed to eat," he confesses. Yet he remains faithful to Marta, to help avoid becoming attached to provincial exile. Underneath a ruined wharf, as if capturing a glimpse of himself, he watches a dead monkey "drift[ing] back and forth with a certain precision" among the pilings.




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ZAMA

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By Antonio Di Benedetto

*NYRB*, 198 pages, \$15.95

Di Benedetto (1922-86), the translator Esther Allen explains in the preface, was himself self-tethered to his home city of Mendoza, far from the center of Argentinean literary life in Buenos Aires. In 1953, he published "Animal World," his first book; three others,

including “Zama,” hundreds of short stories, and a couple screenplays followed. The military junta that took power in March 1976 had Di Benedetto arrested and jailed for reasons still unclear. Released after 18 months, he went into exile, living in Europe and the United States.

“Animal World,” Ms. Allen notes, “concerns all sorts of transactions and transmutations between human and animal” and seems to draw thematically on Franz Kafka. But Di Benedetto always maintained that he didn’t read Kafka until just before he wrote “Zama,” in which animals appear mostly as metaphor. (In Asunción, for example, certain fish “that the river spurns” are “attached, perhaps despite themselves, to the very element that repudiates them.”)

But Di Benedetto applied real elements of Kafka’s fable of modernity to “Zama.” As Ms. Allen points out, Zama’s name, pronounced with a soft “z” in the local accent, is quite possibly a play on Samsa, the name of Kafka’s protagonist in “The Metamorphosis.” Just as Kafka distorts time and distance through the eyes of the man turned into an insect, Di Benedetto deploys them as a gauge of Zama’s exile: “There was nothing before me but a flat expanse where every need was abolished. I had only to move forward, farther and farther. But I feared the end. For, presumably, there was no end.”

Gregor Samsa’s horrifying predicament can be read as a critique of the modern idea that human beings can invent themselves anew by separating from and exploiting nature and by harnessing time and distance. Samsa, a harried traveling salesman, is now trapped in place, helplessly late for work. The New World-born Zama is also determined to self-invent. But the forces he wishes to seize for his self-invention turn on him. To get ahead, Zama believes that he should associate only with the Spanish-born; once his fidelity begins to fail, he refuses any woman who is black, Indian or mestizo. This position alienates him from the emerging cross-ethnic culture of Latin America that will soon

overthrow Spanish rule. That Zama chooses this alienation only deepens it. “It was as if I, I myself, might generate failure,” he reflects.

Zama’s self-deprecating honesty, even amidst episodes of lechery, cowardice and violence, allows the reader to empathize and hope, against all odds, that he will escape exile. Human beings indeed have always had dirty minds and foul hearts, sought danger, and betrayed themselves, Di Benedetto suggests. “Zama” is thus an early example of historical fiction that rejects the seductive spell of an innocent past. Our pleasure in the historical setting isn’t that of the voyeur, gazing on a purer time and place, but that of looking into a slightly distorting mirror on ourselves.

The Argentinian novelist César Aira may be the most compelling inheritor of Di Benedetto’s project, particularly in the affecting novel “An Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter” (2000), which takes place in the early 19th century, just after “Zama’s” end. In Mr. Aira’s novel, the German landscape painter Johann Moritz Rugendas sets out from Mendoza at the urging of Alexander von Humboldt to capture the “totality” of the country’s landscape—surely a modern impulse. But nature intervenes, sending Rugendas into a dangerous spiral; as Di Benedetto shows and Mr. Aira confirms, how a man faces his own abyss is, indeed, the question for all time.

—*Mr. Popkin is the author of the novel “Lion and Leopard.”*