

C o m m u n i t y B o o k s t o r e  
o f P a r k S l o p e

143 Seventh Avenue · Brooklyn, NY · 11215 · 718. 783. 3075

## **Books Without Borders Reading Group**

First Session, 2008

**Wednesday, September 10<sup>th</sup> @ 7:30 p.m.**

### ***Senselessness* by Horacio Castellanos Moya (Guatemala, pub. *New Directions*, 2008, \$15.95)**

The first of exiled Honduran novelist Moya's eight fictions to be translated in the U.S., this crushing satire has at its center a feisty young unnamed writer in penurious political exile from an unnamed Latin American country. It opens as he explains the daunting and dangerous freelance job he has taken in an also-unnamed neighboring state: to edit a 1,100-page report prepared for the country's Catholic archdiocese that details the current military regime's torture and murder of thousands of indigenous villagers. The writer despises the Church, but is moved and agitated by the disturbing testimonies of the survivors, at once unspeakable in their horror and unforgettable in their phrasing: "the more they killed, the higher they rose up." More or less one long rant, the book's paragraphs go on for pages as the writer gives way to paranoia, and to a sexual longing that his loneliness and powerlessness make nearly unbearable, and that he expresses profanely. It's Moya's genius to make this difficult character seem a product of the same death and disorder documented in the report, as the survivors' voices merge with his own.

### **Additional Resources:**

Books (copies available in the store):

***The Art of Political Murder: Who Killed the Bishop?***, by Francisco Goldman (Grove Press, \$15.00). Goldman tells the true story of the murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi, Guatemala's leading human rights activist, who had been bludgeoned to death in 1998, after releasing a church-sponsored report implicating the military in the murders and disappearances of some 200,000 civilians.

***I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala***, by Rigoberta Menchu (Verso, \$20.00). Illuminated by the enduring courage and passionate sense of justice of an extraordinary woman, I, Rigoberta Menchu recounts experiences common to many Indian communities in Latin America today.

Articles (copies available in the store):

"The Novelist and the Murderers," by Nathaniel Popper. *The Nation*, July 7, 2008 edition.  
[www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com)

"Uncommon Senselessness," by Bill O'Driscoll. *Pittsburgh City Paper*, August 14, 2008 post.  
[www.pittsburghcitypaper.ws](http://www.pittsburghcitypaper.ws)

"On Senselessness," by Ron Slate. *Ron Slate's Blog*, May 29, 2008 post.  
[www.ronslate.com](http://www.ronslate.com)

Film Documentary (being shown in the store on . . .):

**Thursday, September 11<sup>th</sup> @ 7:00 p.m.**  
**When the Mountains Tremble**

This revolutionary tour-de-force and Sundance Film Festival winner shook audiences and critics alike upon its original theatrical release. This updated edition chronicles the astonishing story of one woman who stood up for her people and helped wage a rebellion in the wake of seemingly unconquerable oppression.

As the first film to depict the previously unreported war between the heavily-armed Guatemalan Military and a nearly defenseless Mayan population, it is firmly anchored by the firsthand accounts of Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian woman known around the world for her humanitarian efforts. Throughout the imminent chaos and danger, Menchú provides courage and optimism in a time where death squads kill without conscience and an oppressive dictator seizes power. Filming at the height of a heated battle, filmmakers Pamela Yates and Newton Thomas Sigel threw themselves into the center of a storm to capture live combat footage with a surprisingly robust passion and exhilarating flair.

Questions and Ideas to Consider While, or Even Just After, Reading:

(Thanks to Lynn Schneider for preparing these)

1. "I am not complete in the mind" is the first sentence in *Senselessness*. It is a quote copied by the narrator from the testimony of an Indian man who witnessed his family's murder.

Certainly this is a major theme of the book. Who is not complete in the mind? Castellanos Moya spells out whom he means on pages 2-6. Isn't it implied that WE are incomplete in the mind to be reading this?

2. Why do you think Castellanos Moya gives us this particular narrator, a hard-drinking man with an eye for the woman? He can be quite gross really. What do we know about him? What do you think of him?
3. One reviewer (Powell's Books) says that *Senselessness* gives us "a mind under siege." Certainly that is true. Do you think the narrator is paranoid or are might someone really be out to do him in? Mr. Lytal of *The New York Sun* calls the narrator an increasingly unreliable witness. Do you agree?
4. There are some beautiful portraits here, some drawn with very few words. There is Toto, the little man with the mustache, Pilar, Joseba, and most movingly, there is a cameo of the bishop (pp.55-58). What do we learn about Monseñor in this brief passage?
5. Our narrator is endlessly quoting from his little notebook where he has copied some of the phrases from the Indian testimony that he is editing. He is very touched by the testimony, not only for its truly affecting content but also because of the poetry inherent in it. One critic, Benjamin Lytal of *The New York Sun* says that "Mr. Moya does not intend us to quite equate these snippets with poetry – rather they are the first signs of the narrator's unhealthy relationship with the text." Do you agree? Readysteady Books sees it differently. That

unnamed critic speaks of “sentences emerging from what had once been silence” and feels that the book would have benefited from much more original testimony. He imagines this creating a different kind of book, one of witnessing witnesses. What do you think? Are you satisfied with what the author has given us? Do you think we learn anything about the indigenous people from this quoted testimony that we could not learn from paraphrasing?

6. Chapter 8, the recounting of the narrator’s tryst with Fátima is hilarious black comedy. It is, also, along with Chapter 10, the account of the party, highly effective drama. How does Castellanos Moya achieve such dramatic effect?
7. Critic Bill Driscoll of the Pittsburgh City Paper says that the book “forces readers to reflect on the ways in which we seek to understand the outbreaks of mass violence that are a hallmark of modern times.” Any comments?