



## Sudden Death

*Álvaro Enríquez* , *Natasha Wimmer* (Translator)

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**A daring, kaleidoscopic novel about the clash of empires and ideas in the sixteenth century that continue to reverberate throughout modernity—a story unlike anything you’ve ever read before.**

*Sudden Death* begins with a brutal tennis match that could decide the fate of the world. The bawdy Italian painter Caravaggio and the loutish Spanish poet Quevedo battle it out before a crowd that includes Galileo, Mary Magdalene, and a generation of popes who would throw Europe into the flames. In England, Thomas Cromwell and Henry VIII behead Anne Boleyn, and her crafty executioner transforms her legendary locks into the most sought-after tennis balls of the time. Across the ocean in Mexico, the last Aztec emperors play their own games, as conquistador Hernán Cortés and his Mayan translator and lover, La Malinche, scheme and conquer, fight and f\*\*k, not knowing that their domestic comedy will change the world. And in a remote Mexican colony a bishop reads Thomas More’s *Utopia* and thinks that instead of a parody, it’s a manual.

In this mind-bending, prismatic novel, worlds collide, time coils, traditions break down. There are assassinations and executions, hallucinogenic mushrooms, utopias, carnal liaisons and papal dramas, artistic and religious revolutions, love stories and war stories. A dazzlingly original voice and a postmodern visionary, Álvaro Enrigue tells a grand adventure of the dawn of the modern era in this short, powerful punch of a novel. Game, set, match.

## Sudden Death Details

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Author : Álvaro Enrigue , Natasha Wimmer (Translator)

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# From Reader Review Sudden Death for online ebook

## Nnenna says

About 30 pages into this book, I wasn't entirely sure what was happening, but I decided to accept that feeling and buckle up for the ride. And what a ride it was! Sudden Death describes a fictional tennis match between the Italian painter, Caravaggio, and the Spanish poet, Francisco Quevedo. Interspersed between the games are snippets from historical texts, emails with his editor, and storylines featuring other prominent historical figures, such as Hernán Cortés and Vasco de Quiroga. Like the tennis ball in the match, the reader bounces around wildly from story to story and the result is disorienting and mind-bending (in a good way!).

First of all, this was a lot of fun and I certainly haven't read anything like it before. Enrigue loves to play with reality, so that it's difficult to distinguish between fact, speculation, and pure imagination. The novel is full of violence- beheadings, religious movements, and war. Enrigue breaks up these brutal tales with bits of humor so that one minute you're wincing at a death and the next you're chuckling at the ridiculousness of some of the characters (sometimes the wincing and the chuckling is happening at the same time).

Enrigue explores so many themes in Sudden Death, from language, translation, and the power of words, to art and the responsibility of the artist. The chapters are generally short and move quickly, but I found myself constantly pausing to look up a historical figure, or a movement, or one of Caravaggio's paintings. My history knowledge is rather rusty at the moment, so it would be interesting to reread this at a later point with a better understanding of the historical context.

I was able to attend an event with the author and he said that "the novel is a proposal." It's up to the reader to bring their own interpretations to the table. The author was able to say so much in such a short novel. My review is just scratching the surface- I want more people to read this so that we can discuss!

If you want to hear me talk more about this novel, I discussed it in my February wrap-up:  
[https://youtu.be/\\_GTUZuEB6h8](https://youtu.be/_GTUZuEB6h8)

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## Mainon says

I suspected the awful disjointedness of this novel would garner praise (it's so bold!), and I was right.

### From World Literature Today:

"The Spanish invasion of the New World, the tumultuous life of Caravaggio, the death of Anne Boleyn, and the erotic escapades of notorious conquistador Hernán Cortés are revised and woven into an intricate, inextricable tapestry. With apparent effortlessness, Enrigue fuses together ostensibly discordant narratives, fashioning a riveting, hilarious, and insightful romp."

### My rewrite:

"The Spanish invasion of the New World, the tumultuous life of Caravaggio, the **macabre use** of Anne Boleyn's **hair to make tennis balls after her death**, and the **sexually explicit (not erotic, and mostly unpleasant) imaginary** escapades of notorious conquistador Hernán Cortés are **freely reinvented** and woven into a **lumpy, unconvincing mess of what might have been a tapestry in more skilled editorial hands**. With **much** apparent effort--so much so that he **jarringly breaks the narrative by inserting an**

**email chain with his publisher, asking if he can use those emails in his novel--Enrique mashes together wildly discordant narratives, fashioning a confusing and unsatisfying romp. That romp is punctuated by unexpected (largely unwelcome) male erections as well as unexpected (largely unwelcome) twenty-first-century first-person winks at the reader, wherein Enrique assures the reader that he doesn't really know what this book is about, either.**

But just in case you decide to read this anyway, keep your phone or laptop handy, as you will want to translate the untranslated French, Spanish, and Italian phrases that litter the book, and look up the Caravaggio paintings he spends so many pages describing, heedless of the maxim that a picture is worth a thousand words.

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## **Caroline says**

Amazing writing. Amazing. And great translation by Natasha Wimmer.

This is powerful writing about art, religion, opposites, transitions, the Spanish conquest of Mexico, love, politics, and conflict. In only 260 pages Enrique creates a multi-dimensional web of time and place. He populates it with many famous people and works of art and literature. He hangs these on a framework of a tennis match between Caravaggio and Quevedo, artist and poet. In between each game's points we are whisked away to inhabit the world of Hernan Cortez as he morphs from clumsy peasant to victory machine (at least as long as Maliche was at his side), or the intrigues of the cardinals and wealthy Italian bankers who preside over the transition to the Counter-Reformation, or Enrique's own author's reflections and research. We watch the Aztecs try to make sense of this new people, and witness their utter destruction. We experience the emergence of modern painting as Caravaggio feels his way toward mastery amidst a death-defying debauchery.

I don't want to spoil this by telling too much--just find a copy and read it--now. It is funny, it is tour de force writing that culminates in a mushroom-fueled mash of the various storylines, it is poignant, it is now on my favorites shelf. As I wrote in an update, I saw Enrique at an author event last week and was totally delighted. If you have a chance to hear him, go.

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## **Elaine says**

Quite erudite, and some lovely tidbits about various things that do interest me quite a lot - tales of New World first encounters, Caravaggio, Anne Boleyn. But don't believe people who say it's not about tennis. There's a lot of tennis. And I like tennis. But I don't, really don't, ever want to read a play by play account of a tennis match, even if it's the most amazingly hungover burlesque historically fanciful tennis match ever. I also found the book more than a little annoying when it parades the genealogy of various counterreformation cardinals. There is too much to keep track of for such a short book. And if you already know a lot about the counter reformation Catholic Church (I don't), you may enjoy this much more than I did - but if you don't, you'll not find out from Enrique why you should care, and will find it all a bit "inside tennis". But still quite clever, and certainly a fine portrait of Caravaggio.

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## Rincey says

Maybe closer to a 2.5 stars? This is a book that I don't think I can really appreciate because I know I didn't get it all. Plus I lack the historical knowledge to truly get everything he is talking about and referencing. That being said, it still was kind of fun to read? The writing is great and the book can be kind of funny at times, but it was hard for me to really grasp the bigger picture. It felt a little bit like I just rode a roller coaster, while a fun little ride, I don't think I have any idea what I just passed through.

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## Yiannis says

Δεν ε?ναι μια γραμμικ? αφ?γηση και σε πολλο?ς δεν θα αρ?σει. Ο Καραβ?τζιο πα?ζει τ?νις με τον Καβ?δο, εν? στην ?λλη μερι? του ωκεανο? Κορτ?ς, Ατζ?κοι και Ισπανο? κατακτητ?ς. Ενδι?μεσα ορισμο? για το τ?νις, αφηγηματικ? ιντερμ?τζα.

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## Douglas says

This is the best book I've read in years. An indictment, history, and hope. Caravaggio in a tennis match with a Spanish poet. A tennis ball made from Anne Boleyn's hair. The savage diplomacy of Hernán Cortés. A mitre of feathers for the Pope made by the recently conquered natives of the Americas. These are all things that happened in this book, but it's not what it's about. This is a book about today. It's a book about how our past and the choices we make today affect our now and future. It's a story about the battle for Mexico. It's a story about our current wars. This could be one of the most important pieces of literature written in our time. As I begin to fully grasp what Enrigue did with this book, I'm convinced that the novel is not in danger. The novel is evolving, and in *Sudden Death*, we see the plumes of decay and history through a new light, and what we thought was dead is very much alive.

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## Vit Babenco says

**Álvaro Enrigue** told me many new things about tennis although I'm not sure I needed to know them.

I've got an impression that he had very little to say so he turned *Sudden Death* into a collection of trivial facts, irrelevant fillers, cock-and-bull allegations and superficial lies.

“Without removing his gaze from their enticing skirts, the duke ran through the images he retained of the previous night. These two hadn't been at the brothel or the tavern. It took him a while to pinpoint where he'd seen them: in a painting that he'd had the leisure to examine as he and the poet waited endlessly for an audience with a banker. The whores appeared in it as models for Martha and her cousin Mary Magdalene. The matter was resolved when he recognized a seductive flaw—a big mark like a continent on Martha's chin—which the painter had copied just as it was. They had even discussed it: Who would put a saint infected with some contagion in a painting? The poet had pointed out that Mary Magdalene, played by a strikingly lovely and spirited model, was holding the mirror of vanity in a hand with a crooked finger. The world turned upside down, he said.”

All this amounts to zilch and it adds nothing to literature.

When an author has nothing to say he starts talking statistics and politics and nonsense.

The film *Caravaggio* by Derek Jarman is worth at least three of such fluffy and hollow books like this one.

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## Andrea says

Este libro me dejó sin respiración. Creo que es de lo mejor que he leído y no sé por dónde empezar a explicar por qué. Si bien es una novela que a alguien se le podría ocurrir poner en el estante de las novelas históricas, es tanto tanto tanto más que eso. Alguien dijo que es como un aleph, y sí, creo que es una buena descripción. Trata de todo, si bien se centra en el siglo XVI europeo y de Nueva España. Es bellísima y asquerosa, profundamente seria y cómica, inteligente, sensible. Quizás lo único que le pueda criticar es que me haya seducido de esta manera. Es probable que necesite unos días para tomar distancia. En este momento me falta el aire y no sé si es porque me duele haberla terminado o por la felicidad de haberla leído.

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## Makis Dionis says

Ήνα βιβλ?ο με τον Καραβ?τζο και τον Κεβεδο. Τον Κορτ?ζ και τον Κουαουτ?μοκ, τον Γαλιλα?ο και τον Π?πα τον Πιο ?. Γιγαντιες προσωπικ?τητες που συγκρο?ονται, γαμανε, μεθ?νε, στοιχηματ?ζουν στο απ?λυτο κεν?.

Δεν ε?ναι Ήνα βιβλ?ο για το τ?νις, για την αντιμεταρρ?θμιση, ο?τε ε?ναι Ήνα βιβλ?ο περ? της αργ?ς και μυστηρι?δους ενσωμ?τωσης της αμερικανικ?ς ηπε?ρου σ'αυτ? που αποκαλο?με "Δυτικ? Κ?σμο".

Σε κ?θε περ?πτωση το βιβλ?ο γρ?φτηκε γιατ? π?ντα κερδ?ζουν οι κακο? που πα?ζουν π?ντα με πλεον?κτημα και δεν συνιστ?ται σε αναγν?στες με γραμμικ? προσανατολισμ?

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## Lee says

I'm happy to have had the opportunity to read this in advance and interview the author. Generally, it's a great, beguiling book -- like a mystery novel, its far-flung parts come together over time via the life-changing magic of an assertion of associative intelligence. (The author also states what's up at times, too.) Felt after a while like sitting mid-court watching a ball zip back and forth across time and space. A po-mo literary entertainment with sharp hermeneutical knives up its sleeves. An opportunity for good readers to have some fun if they're up for a game. Translated by Natasha Wimmer, who most famously translated 2666 -- her skill is on display throughout in that the language conveys an individuated voice, approach, rhythm, texture.

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## Lark Benobi says

The novel begins by telling you nothing in it is true:

*the only real things in a novel are the sequences of letters, words, and sentences that make it up, and the paper on which they're printed.*

But what follows is told in a tone that mimics the tone of a popular history book. Never mind that the historic

characters who appear in this novel are set into scenes of great ridiculousness-- history itself is ridiculous series of unlikely events, isn't it?--so as I read sentence after sentence of implausible if historic-sounding details, each so surprising and specific (and playful and delightful), I kept thinking, "wait, did that really happen?" or "could it have been that way?" until I just needed to give myself up to the story entirely and to be carried off into its world.

And through it all, somehow this feeling kept surprising me, that I could be having so much fun while reading a book that is so erudite and so well-written. No matter how playful the novel is, there is this skittering tension in it between fact and fiction, between what is known about the past, and what can never be known about the past. It's both a deep-fun book, and a fun-deep book. Wonderful.

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## jeremy says

*it's no coincidence that when speaking of someone's death in mexico we say he "hung up his tennis shoes," that he "went out tennis shoes first." we are who we are, unfixable, fucked. we wear tennis shoes. we fly from good to evil, from happiness to responsibility, from jealousy to sex. souls batted back and forth across the court. this is the serve.*

the second of álvaro enrique's works to be translated into english (after his short story collection, *hypothermia*), *sudden death* (*muerte súbita*) is a remarkable, matchless novel of historical fiction (if one were given to approximating the closest genre in which to situate it). winner of the prestigious herralde prize in 2013 (placing him squarely among the good company of marías, bolaño, vila-matas, giralt torrente, pitol, pauls, sada, villoro, nettel, et al.), *sudden death* is (not) a book about the origins of tennis, (nor) the counter-reformation, (nor) italian painter caravaggio or spanish poet quevedo, (nor) the prolonged, inebriated tennis match they play with a ball crafted from the hair of (the recently beheaded) anne boley. enrique, mexican author and bogotá39 honoree (celebrating young latin american writers of great promise; see also: zambra, neuman, alarcón, halfon, nettel, volpi, vásquez, díaz, roncagliolo, et al.), has been enjoying the sort of buzz that translated authors seldom garner (save for likes of bolaño, knausgård, ferrante, and perhaps krasznahorkai). *sudden death* makes clear that the hype is indeed well-warranted.

with the aforementioned tennis match between caravaggio and quevedo as its centerpiece, *sudden death* expounds upon history, conquest, art, religion, and tennis. with violence and sex aplenty, a vignette-style prose, and complementary humor, *sudden death*, while defining easy classification, stands alone as a work of great imagination, impressive execution, and unique combination of fact and fiction, history and histrionics. a lively, ribald cast of characters and cameos (hernán cortés and galileo galilei, most notably) invigorate a novel that is already brimming with novelty and nuance.

*sudden death*, like so much of the best literature from spanish-speaking countries, melds tradition with originality. enrique (aka mr. valeria luiselli) looks backward (as perhaps bolaño did forward in 2666) to posit bloodshed, greed, and subjugation as the thread that is forever woven into our past, present, and presumable future. with a deft touch, *sudden death* doesn't bow under the weight of history, as enrique is far too skilled to succumb to the trappings of centuries long elapsed. that he has wrought humor, perspective, and literary ingenuity from the past is itself an impressive feat. *sudden death*, surely an early contender for one of 2016's finest works of fiction, marks enrique as yet another latin american author for whom inventiveness, fertility, and singularity seem ever so effortless.

*as i write, i don't know what this book is about. it's not exactly about a tennis match. nor is it a*

*book about the slow and mysterious integration of america into what we call "the western world" -- an outrageous misapprehension, since from the american perspective, europe is the east. maybe it's just a book about how to write this book; maybe that's what all books are about. a book with a lot of back and forth, like a game of tennis.*

*it isn't a book about caravaggio or quevedo, though caravaggio and quevedo are in the book, as are cortés and cuauhtémoc, and galileo and pius iv. gigantic individuals facing off. all fucking, getting drunk, gambling in the void. novels demolish monuments because all novels, even the most chaste, are a tiny bit pornographic.*

*nor is it a book about the birth of tennis as a popular sport, though it definitely has its roots in extensive research i conducted on the subject with a grant at the new york public library. i embarked on the research after mulling over the discovery of a fascinating bit of information: the first truly modern painter in history was also a great tennis player and a murderer. our brother.*

*nor is it a book about the counter-reformation, but it takes place in a time that now goes by that name, which is why it's a book that features twisted and bloodthirsty priests, sex addict priests who fucked children for sport, thieving priests who obscenely swelled their coffers with the tithing and alms of poor all over the world. priests who were swine.*

*...i don't know what this book is about. i know that as i wrote it i was angry because the bad guys always win. maybe all books are written simply because in every game the bad guys have the advantage and that is beyond bearing.*

\*translated from the spanish by natasha wimmer (bolaño, giralt torrente, vargas llosa, restrepo, fresán)

\*\*i have yet, being no scholar of history, to make sense of the three characters that bear eerily similar names (álvaro de campos, alberto caro, and ricardo de los reyes) to fernando pessoa's most frequently employed heteronyms. perhaps enigme is merely offering a nod to one of portugal's most enigmatic and poetical sons.

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## **Erika says**

"As I write, I don't know what this book is about." -the author, on p. 203

DUDE...you and me both. I wanted so much to like this book (or, hell, at least to understand it), but it was just not my cup of tea. I was intrigued by the premise - a fictional tennis match between the Italian painter Caravaggio and the Spanish poet Quevedo at the end of the sixteenth century serves as a framing device for a novel that's part alternative history, part historical fiction, and part present-day rumination on history itself. And there were occasional passages of brilliantly vivid writing and sharp, original insight (for which both the author and the translator deserve props)...but there were far too many other passages that felt like little more than lists of names, and that carried no emotional weight.

Ultimately, this book didn't give me anything to grab onto...and the fact that I clearly didn't understand what all the fuss is about just made me feel stupid and resentful.



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## Antonomasia says

[4.5] With its scenes of Caravaggio and Spanish poet Quevedo playing a hungover tennis match (using a ball stuffed with Anne Boleyn's hair) in lieu of a duel over some slight no-one can remember, Counter-Reformation popes scheming and receiving gifts of exquisite iridescent New World featherwork, and Cortés and Malinalli (La Malinche) in bed, and an attempt to create *Utopia* which more or less worked, resorting to synopsis is the most obviously attention-grabbing ways to open a review of this book. *Sudden Death* is one of those po-mo [anti?]novels of bits and pieces; tangentially related historical fictions are interspersed with excerpts from centuries-old treatises, a few of the author's autobiographical musings and how-I-wrote-this-book-ness, and games like a series of emails with his editor, which he is not given permission to publish...but they're here and they couldn't have got here without it. Some such books – including one I've been reading recently, *The Physics of Sorrow*, jump and meander along arbitrary streams of consciousness, but Enrigue has created a highly organised example. I can't really do better than Lee's metaphors for the structure and reading of *Sudden Death*, but the discrete nature of most of the chapters (excepting the very last few where paragraphs from different stories begin to blend) resembles reading a series of articles open in different browser tabs, dealing with a few different topics of interest, skipping from one subject to another to avert boredom. Relationships and motifs begin to build up between the articles although they were not originally created to be read together. Except these were.

A working knowledge of sixteenth century history (Western Europe, Central America) will make this a less challenging read than it may be without: most main characters would be familiar, albeit not everything they do. Some of it's just made up; other events are the kind of salaciousness and specialist detail not found in yr. avg. general survey textbook and might be juicy finds even for some seasoned historians. In one of his commentary chapters, Enrigue states, *all novels, even the most chaste, are a tiny bit pornographic*. This is not the most chaste of novels. One feels a little embarrassed on behalf of Galileo in particular; were those extravagantly bawdy sexual opinions, amusing though they are to some readers, and implying experience of congress with livestock, anything to do with his real self? Though in best early-modern fashion, Enrigue couches those smutty lines within a beautifully poignant scene, one that hints at the fluidity of [romantic] friendships between some intellectual men of the era.

The book helped resolve questions remaining after a small historical debate with a friend some time ago. Was the conquest of the Aztecs qualitatively different from most other acts of colonialism, given their extremes of human sacrifice and torture? To what extent was it comparable to overthrowing the Nazis? I wondered what Latin American peoples (non-historians) thought – were certain European methods of killing at that same time in history more horrifying because more alien? And what might it feel like to be descended from Aztecs? Do they have any role in assertions of indigenous identity? One contemporary Mexican author in his forties obviously doesn't speak for everyone, but he clarified a certain amount.

*For once, history was just: a particularly bloody realm reduced to a single barge. Though that didn't mean the good guys had won. The good guys never win...*

*Outside of the Holy Roman Empire's triangle of influence, the conquistadors must have been perceived by the majorities that surrounded them as a tribe with an inevitably superior technology of death, but also with less of a thirst for blood than the previous occupants of Mexico's imperial capital. Not that the recent arrivals were humanists on a mission to improve anyone's life, but at least they didn't make sacrifices to frenzied and glamorous gods – lovers of spectacle and gore like none before or since. Their sacrifices were*

*to a bland and pragmatic god called money, statistically more lethal than the four divine Tezcatlipocas put together, but also slower in its means of causing harm...*

*If in 1521 the nose of Hernán Cortés's horse marked the furthest reach of the Holy Roman Empire, by 1538 the Aztecs were already as lost and mythical a people as the Atlanteans or the Garamantes, and their genetic material lay at the bottom of Lake Texcoco, or had been circulated for the last time through the lungs of those who breathed in the smoke of the huge piles of bodies burned after the fall of Tenochtitlan. We Mexicans aren't descendants of the Mexicas, but of the nations that joined with Cortés to overthrow them. We're a country whose name is the product of nostalgia and guilt.*

Although evidently a handful of Aztecs survived; late in the book appears Huanitzin (and his son): a nobleman skilled in the art of featherworking, who made, among other treasures, a mitre gifted to the pope that is also handled by Caravaggio elsewhere, and decades later, in the book.

Most curiously, the Aztec language had a character almost opposite to its speakers' terrifying reputation: *Mexican Spanish, at times so disconcerting and easy to misinterpret, gets its warmth and courtesy from Nahuatl: the gentlest and most gracious of tongues; an airy, bird-like form of speech. When someone from Madrid or Montevideo walks into a room, he says, 'Permiso,' and that's it. In contrast, a Mexican erects a syntactic edifice so complicated that it requires both a negative clause and a verb in the conditional: 'If it's no trouble, might I come in?' ...*

*It's not that they're sappier or more sentimental than other Spanish speakers; it's just that Mexican Spanish is crisscrossed with the scars of Nahuatl. In our mental hard drives, the file of the mother tongue still opens at certain prompts, even though it's been two or three hundred years since we spoke it.*

Huanitzin's attempts to speak Spanish result in much punning confusion. Translator Natasha Wimmer, also responsible for putting Bolaño into English, must have worked some kind of transposing/rewriting magic here. It would be fascinating to know what the original wordplays were, as they don't translate directly, at least according to my school Spanish.

*Cortés asked Huanitzin what else he needed in order to pay tribute to the emperor. Shoes, he replied. What kind, asked the conquistador, imagining that he must be cold and want woollen slippers. Like yours, said Huanitzin – who, being an Aztec noble and a featherworker, considered a provincial squire turned soldier to be of a class beneath his. With cockles. Cockles? asked Cortés. The Indian pointed to the captain's instep, festooned with a golden buckle and inlaid with mother of pearl. Buckles, said the conquistador; shoes with buckles.*

What an elegant double reference to shells.

*The featherworker shrugged his shoulders: If you need anything, let me know. What could I possibly need? I don't know – a handsome peasant to take to the pope? A peasant? To flail him, as a sign of our devotion. No one touches His Holiness. Of course, that's why he's pope, but I'm sure his bishops flail him. Hail him. That's right, flail him. Not a handsome peasant, the padre continued to provoke him. Why? He's a man of God, Huanitzin; he must be eighty years old. It's a matter of coming up with the right peasant, Huanitzin concluded, wrinkling his brow and fingering the scanty beard he might better have shaved. How can you think of a peasant for the pope? A nice one, answered the Indian. Then, unperturbed, he bid the bishop goodbye...*

Even funnier in context, given various antics of clergymen and noblemen with young men that precede this in the novel.

I very much like this intriguing UK cover - I go for geometric designs anyway, and this is essentially one

made from 3D objects (wonder if the designer made them in reality, not only on a screen; they look very solid): they are the wadding/cotton insides of old-style tennis balls, bound in regular patterns with thread, before receiving their final outer leather covering. (For, as described in the book, it was only in some places in the sixteenth century, not everywhere, the sinister and decadent fashion to make tennis balls from the hair of the executed.)

I can't quite fathom why this didn't feel like a 5-star book whilst reading; it sure as hell sounds like one whilst writing it up. That elusive whatever-it-is just wasn't there enough of the time, or maybe I was simply tired. With the right combination of subcultural and academic interests, you might fall in love with it on the first page, for bringing such things together in a single sentence: *In 1451, Edmund Lacey, Bishop of Exeter, defined the game with the same suppressed rage with which my mother referred to the falling-apart Converse I wore as a kid: ad ludum pile vulgariter nuncupatum Tenys.* (There are a few bits of untranslated Latin and Italian, most near the beginning.) Enrigue often says what the book isn't, but afterwards it comes together as a novel of living history. (I recommend writing about it; more than most books I've read, reviewing made sense of it in my head, and isn't only a way of trying to describe it to others.) The tennis match doesn't seem directly relevant to structures of the modern world, unlike the political history, or the explanations of which public buildings now stand where Aztec edifices once did, but its physicality (the descriptions of play really fire off the mirror neurons; I could feel the actions just as I would if watching tennis on TV) and its witty playfulness meshes with the rest to allude to a literary mood of the times of its setting: Rabelaisian, Shakespearean. Yet the presence of tennis arguably references that recent po-mo literary institution *Infinite Jest* (someone should write a review comparing the two as tennis novels), whilst on a completely different scale, the ultra-short chapters in *Sudden Death* are moulded to the twenty-first century idea of the internet-pruned attention span or commuter read: modern buildings for which the old invisibly provides foundations.

*Thank you to Netgalley and the publisher Harvill Secker (Penguin Random House UK), from whom I received an advance copy in exchange for an honest review.*

[Further quotes in the status updates.]

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