



## Down the Rabbit Hole: A Novel

By Juan Pablo Villalobos

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**"A brief and majestic debut." ?Matías Néspolo, *El Mundo***

Tochtli lives in a palace. He loves hats, samurai, guillotines, and dictionaries, and what he wants more than anything right now is a new pet for his private zoo: a pygmy hippopotamus from Liberia. But Tochtli is a child whose father is a drug baron on the verge of taking over a powerful cartel, and Tochtli is growing up in a luxury hideout that he shares with hit men, prostitutes, dealers, servants, and the odd corrupt politician or two. Long-listed for *The Guardian* First Book Award, *Down the Rabbit Hole*, a masterful and darkly comic first novel, is the chronicle of a delirious journey to grant a child's wish.

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## **Down the Rabbit Hole: A Novel By Juan Pablo Villalobos Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“Perfectly formed . . . Although easily devoured in one sitting, this clever little book is to be contemplated at length afterwards.” ?*The Guardian*

“Showing how a child absorbs violence without awareness that something is wrong is a tricky endeavor. Mr. Villalobos nails it.” ?*Susannah Meadows, The New York Times*

“*Down the Rabbit Hole* is a miniature high-speed experiment with perspective . . . A deliberate, wild attack on the conventions of literature.” ?*Adam Thirlwell*

“Juan Pablo Villalobos brilliantly encapsulates the chaos of a lawless existence in which, under the sway of drug lords, anything might happen and everything goes . . . *Down the Rabbit Hole* is an astonishing debut.” ?*Lucy Popescu, The Independent*

“If you're going to have an imprisoned child narrate a novel, then not so much as a word should be out of place. There are no such slips in Juan Pablo Villalobos's debut novella. We have here a control over the material which is so tight it is almost claustrophobic . . . This is a novel about failing to understand the bigger picture, and in its absence we can see it more clearly.” ?*Nicholas Lezard, The Guardian, Choice of the Week*

“Villalobos creates Tochtli's half-corrupt, half-innocent world . . . with a brilliant, tragi-comic light touch.” ?*Jane Shilling, Daily Mail*

“Juan Pablo Villalobos has done a masterful job creating a child narrator . . . *Down the Rabbit Hole* is, on the surface, innocent, clever and lovable, but its implications are deeply disturbing . . . [it] is a remarkable reflection on the uncontrollable narco violence that defines contemporary Mexico. And it's an absolute must read.” ?*The Coffin Factory*

“The riveting voice of Tochtli grasps our hearts as we realize that this is a world where even fate can be governed by power. In this miasma of pathos and politics, *Down the Rabbit Hole* brilliantly incorporates dreams, loyalty and the loss of innocence.” ?*Alice Tao, The Houston Chronicle*

“With this book we have discovered Juan Pablo Villalobos, a linguistic virtuoso able to penetrate the elusive world of literature, shedding light on many of its mysteries.” ?*José Antonio Aguado, Diari de Terrassa*

“With *Down the Rabbit Hole*, Juan Pablo Villalobos has made a dramatic entrance into the literary world. It is a book that must be read for its great aesthetic value and darkly humorous tone. A book that throws a clear light on a dark subject.” ?*Teresa García Díaz, Amerika*

### About the Author

**Juan Pablo Villalobos** was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1973. He studied marketing and Spanish literature. He has researched such diverse topics as the influence of the avant-garde on the work of César Aira and the flexibility of pipelines for electrical installations. He lives in Barcelona, Spain.

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## ONE

Some people say I'm precocious. They say it mainly because they think I know difficult words for a little boy. Some of the difficult words I know are: sordid, disastrous, immaculate, pathetic, and devastating. There aren't really that many people who say I'm precocious. The problem is I don't know that many people. I know maybe thirteen or fourteen people, and four of them say I'm precocious. They say I look older. Or the other way around: that I'm too little to know words like that. Or back-to-front and the other way around, sometimes people think I'm a dwarf. But I don't think I'm precocious. What happens is I have a trick, like magicians who pull rabbits out of hats, except I pull words out of the dictionary. Every night before I go to sleep I read the dictionary. My memory, which is really good, practically devastating, does the rest. Yolcaut doesn't think I'm precocious either. He says I'm a genius, he tells me:

"Tochtli, you're a genius, you little bastard."

And he strokes my head with his fingers covered in gold-and-diamond rings.

Anyway, more people say I'm odd: seven. And just because I really like hats and always wear one. Wearing a hat is a good habit immaculate people have. In the sky there are pigeons doing their business. If you don't wear a hat you end up with a dirty head. Pigeons have no shame. They do their dirty business in front of everyone, while they're flying. They could easily do it hidden in the branches of a tree. Then we wouldn't have to spend the whole time looking at the sky and worrying about our heads. But hats, if they're good hats, can also be used to make you look distinguished. That is, hats are like the crowns of kings. If you're not a king you can wear a hat to be distinguished. And if you're not a king and you don't wear a hat you end up being a nobody.

I don't think I'm odd for wearing a hat. And oddness is related to ugliness, like Cinteotl says. What I definitely am is macho. For example: I don't cry all the time because I don't have a mum. If you don't have a mum you're supposed to cry a lot, gallons of tears, two or three gallons a day. But I don't cry, because people who cry are faggots. When I'm sad Yolcaut tells me not to cry, he says:

"Chin up, Tochtli, take it like a man."

Yolcaut is my daddy, but he doesn't like it when I call him Daddy. He says we're the best and most macho gang for at least eight kilometers. Yolcaut is a realist and that's why he doesn't say we're the best gang in the universe or the best gang for 8,000 kilometers. Realists are people who think reality isn't how you think it is. Yolcaut told me that. Reality is like this and that's it. Tough luck. The realist's favorite saying is you have to be realistic.

I think we really are a very good gang. I have proof. Gangs are all about solidarity. So solidarity means that, because I like hats, Yolcaut buys me hats, lots of hats, so many that I have a collection of hats from all over the world and from all the different periods of the world. Although now more than new hats what I want is a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus. I've already written it down on the list of things I want and given it to Miztli. That's how we always do it, because I don't go out much, so Miztli buys me all the things I want on orders from Yolcaut. And since Miztli has a really bad memory I have to write lists for him. But you can't buy a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus that easily, in a pet shop. The biggest thing they sell in a pet shop is a dog. But who wants a dog? No one wants a dog. It's so hard to get a Liberian pygmy hippopotamus that it might be the only way to do it is by going to catch one in Liberia. That's why my tummy is hurting so much. Actually my tummy always hurts, but recently I've been getting cramps more often.

I think at the moment my life is a little bit sordid. Or pathetic.

\* \* \*

I nearly always get on well with Mazatzin. He only annoys me when he's strict and makes me stick to our study plan rigidly. Mazatzin, by the way, doesn't call me Tochtli. He calls me Usagi, which is my name in Japanese, because he loves everything from the empire of Japan. What I really like about the empire of Japan

are the samurai films. I've seen some of them so many times I know them off by heart. When I watch them I go on ahead and say the samurai's conversations out loud before they do. And I never get it wrong. That's because of my memory, which really is almost devastating. One of the films is called *Twilight of the Samurai* and it's about an old samurai who teaches the way of the samurai to a little boy. There's one bit where he makes the boy stay still and mute for days and days. He says to him: "The guardian is stealthy and knows how to wait. Patience is his best weapon, like the crane who does not know despair. The weak are known by their movement. The strong by their stillness. Look at the devastating sword that knows not fear. Look at the wind. Look at your eyelashes. Close your eyes and look at your eyelashes." It's not just this film I know off by heart, I know lots more, four.

One day, instead of teaching a lesson, Mazatzin told me his life story and it's really sordid and pathetic. What happened is that he used to do really good business in TV advertising. He earned millions of pesos by making up adverts for shampoo and fizzy drinks. But Mazatzin was always sad, because he'd actually studied to be a writer. This is where it gets sordid: someone earning millions of pesos being sad because they're not a writer. That's sordid. And so in the end, because he was so sad Mazatzin went to live very far away, in a cabin in the middle of nowhere, on top of a mountain I think. He wanted to sit down and think and write a book about life. He even took a computer with him. That's not sordid, but it is pathetic. The problem was that Mazatzin didn't feel inspired and meanwhile his business partner, who was also his best friend, scammed him out of his millions of pesos. He wasn't a best friend at all but a traitor.

That's when Mazatzin came to work for us, because Mazatzin is educated. Yolcaut says that educated people are the ones who think they're great because they know lots of things. They know things about science, like the fact that pigeons transmit disgusting diseases. They also know things about history, such as how the French love cutting the heads off kings. That's why educated people like being teachers. Sometimes the things they know are wrong, like if you want to write a book you have to go and live in a cabin in the middle of nowhere on top of a mountain. That's what Yolcaut says, that educated people know lots of things about books, but nothing at all about life. We live in the middle of nowhere too, but we don't do it for inspiration. We do it for protection.

Anyway, since I can't go to school, Mazatzin teaches me things from books. At the moment we're studying the conquest of Mexico. It's a fun topic, with war and blood and dead people. The story goes like this: On one side there were the kings and queens of the Spanish empire and on the other side there were the Indians who lived in Mexico. Then the kings and queens of Spain wanted to be the kings and queens of Mexico, too. So they came and they started killing all the Indians, but only to scare them and make them accept their new kings. Well, the truth is they didn't even kill some of the Indians, they just burned their feet. This whole story makes Mazatzin furious, because he wears calico shirts and leather sandals as if he was an Indian. And he starts with one of his lectures. He says:

"They stole our money, Usagi, they plundered our country!"

It's almost as if the dead Indians were his cousins or his uncles. Pathetic. By the way, the Spanish don't like cutting the heads off kings. They still have living kings and queens with their heads stuck on their shoulders. Mazatzin showed me a photo in a magazine. That's really pathetic, too.

\* \* \*

One of the things I've learned from Yolcaut is that sometimes people don't turn into corpses with just one bullet. Sometimes they need three or even fourteen bullets. It all depends where you aim them. If you put two bullets in their brain they'll die for sure. But you can put up to 1,000 bullets in their hair and nothing will happen, although it must be fun to watch. I know all this from a game Yolcaut and I play. It's a question-and-answer game. One person says a number of bullets in a part of the body and the other one answers: alive, corpse, or too early to tell.

"One bullet in the heart."

"Corpse."

"Thirty bullets in the little toenail of the left foot."

"Alive."

“Three bullets in the pancreas.”

“Too early to tell.”

And we carry on like that. When we run out of body parts we look up new ones in a book that has pictures of all of them, even the prostate and the medulla oblongata. Speaking of the brain, it's important to take off your hat before you put bullets into somebody's brain, so it doesn't get stained. Blood is really hard to get out. This is what Itzpapalotl, the maid who does the cleaning in our palace, always says.

Yes, our palace: Yolcaut and I are the owners of a palace and we're not even kings. The thing is we have a lot of money. A huge amount. We have pesos, which is the money of Mexico. We also have dollars, which is the money of the United States. And we also have euros, which is the money of the countries and kingdoms of Europe. I think we have thousands of millions of all three kinds...

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **James Johnson:**

The knowledge that you get from *Down the Rabbit Hole: A Novel* is the more deep you digging the information that hide into the words the more you get thinking about reading it. It doesn't mean that this book is hard to be aware of but *Down the Rabbit Hole: A Novel* giving you buzz feeling of reading. The author conveys their point in specific way that can be understood through anyone who read the idea because the author of this publication is well-known enough. This kind of book also makes your vocabulary increase well. It is therefore easy to understand then can go along with you, both in printed or e-book style are available. We advise you for having this *Down the Rabbit Hole: A Novel* instantly.

#### **Jonathan McLean:**

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#### **Andrew Hall:**

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