



Buenos Aires Quintet

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán , Nick Caistor (Translation)

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When Pepe Carvalho's uncle asks him to find his son Raúl in Buenos Aires, Pepe is reluctant. All he knows about Argentina is "tango, Maradona, and the disappeared," and he has no desire to find out more. But family is family, and soon Carvalho is in Buenos Aires, getting more caught up in Argentina's troubled past than is good for anybody.

Buenos Aires Quintet Details

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Author : Manuel Vázquez Montalbán , Nick Caistor (Translation)

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From Reader Review Buenos Aires Quintet for online ebook

Rob Kitchen says

The Buenos Aires Quintet is a somewhat curious book using a Spanish detective out of place on a case in the Argentine capital as a means to explore the legacy of the military government period (1974-1983) in which several thousand left-wing politicians and activists 'disappeared'. Pepe Carvalho's task is to find his cousin, Raul, who having been in exile in Spain has returned to find the daughter stolen from him and his dead wife. The story is told in five parts, each focusing on a different case, but with overlapping characters – Carvalho, Raul and his co-conspirators who have all survived the purges but at varying costs, members of the military regime who still wield considerable power, and the new masters including a seemingly straight cop. Each character and each sub-story and the overall piece seem to act allegorically to reveal the multi-layered and complex social relations of post-military government Argentina. It's an interesting and thought-provoking read that often has nice philosophical asides and well-observed scenes, but it is also a little long-winded and uneven at times. Carvalho is also somewhat of a slippery character who I never quite resolved in my mind's eye. However, the macabre sub-story set in an upmarket restaurant is worth the read alone, being a wonderful, darkly humorous set piece.

Palmreader says

Finally finished this. It was fascinating and very difficult to follow. I need to read more Argentinian history to really understand all that was going on. Argentina: Maradona, the disappeared, tango. And all of that was in this book. Interesting characters, but convoluted plot, that really was never resolved. Characters were numerous, and not easily distinguished from each other, although they all had a part to play they were so detailed.

Glad I read this, but not anxious to start another in this series.

Procyon Lotor says

Montalbano si avvicina al nucleo duro della crudeltà. L'Argentina ha il grossissimo guaio di parlar castellano. Questa coincidenza d'istinto illude lo straniero, in particolare il gallego che ci siano delle sovrapposizioni possibili. Gli esiti sono molto peggiori dell'affrontare gli USA convinti di trovarsi in UK. Pepe si trova coinvolto negli strascichi della dittatura, da spagnolo le sue uniche leve interpretative sono derivanti dal Franchismo e per fortuna che da uomo accorto si rende conto velocemente che è uno strumento spuntato, fuorviante e assai pericoloso. Vira pertanto decisamente su uno strumento più consona come questo: scritto nel 1926: Caminito que el tiempo ha borrado, que juntos un día nos viste pasar, he venido por última vez he venido a contarte mi mal. Caminito que entonces estabas bordado de trébol y juncos en flor, una sombra ya pronto será una sombra lo mismo que yo. Desde que se fue triste vivo yo, caminito amigo yo también me voy. Desde que se fue nunca más volví, seguir sus pasos, caminito, adiós. Caminito que todas las tardes feliz recorría cantando mi amor, No le digas si vuelve a pasar Que mi llanto tu huella regrese. Caminito cubierto de cardos, la mano del tiempo tu huella borra. Yo a tu lado quisiera caer y que el tiempo nos mate a los dos. Prima di entrare qui fate fare 50 flessioni al vostro pelo sullo stomaco e una decina di giri di campo al vostro vitalismo animale. Poi impartitegli severe istruzioni di non abbandonare l'uno mai la vista dell'altro

e che Dio ve la mandi buona. Il "caminito", oramai quasi cancellato ? invece sorvegliato assai bene. Si procede nella jungla urbana della storia dei desaparecidos.

Maria Beltrami says

Maradona, tango, desaparecidos.

E Carvalho si infila in tutto questo, soprattutto tango e desaparecidos, in una delle sue più belle indagini, una delle più dolenti e mirabolanti, con uomini che cadono come mosche e tanghi strappamutande, e, come sempre, buon cibo e ottimo vino.

Un libro che fa venire la voglia di vistare Buenos Aires, e mantiene vivo il ricordo delle bastardate della politica.

Joaquin says

"Una mañana mi madre me dio un pedazo de pan que parecía recién hecho o quizá lo imagino recién hecho y un puñado de aceitunas negras, muy sabrosas, de esas aceitunas arrugadas que se llaman de Aragón. Recuerdo aquellos sabores, la alegría de mi libertad en la calle. La mirada protectora de mi madre. Si pudiera volver a aquella mañana."

Tiina says

Probably one of the best Pepe Carvalho novels out there.

Although Carvalho is regarded by some as a detective... the main features of this novel are definitely the characters and the beautiful descriptions of Argentina. Yes, there is a central "case", which Carvalho has been tasked to resolve but this case is not what leads the plot but it is rather molded by the interactions between the characters.

A little uncomfortable to read and it took me much longer to finish than I thought because I felt like I did not have enough knowledge of the historical background. However, that was definitely not a turn-off and instead spurred me to look more into the fascinating history of Argentina.

With numerous references to tango... it almost seems fit to compare this novel to a tango; slow and sensual at some points of the novel (almost surreal) but definitely not missing the sudden change in the tempo.

Martin Mulcahey says

My second and probably last Montalban book, while the book was fine and prose way above average I found that for me the plot and intrigue was often broken up by long soliloquy's on social issues or other matters that seemed to break up the pacing of this already long book. Still enjoyed the lead character of Pepe Carvalho and his eccentricities, but found the story drawn out and a late chapter killing spree really superfluous. Social history of Argentina and sense of place with description of Buenos Aires was excellent so rescued the book a bit for me. Still, given the two books I have now read by Montalban will have be steering away from him unless it is a book of short stories ha ha.

Keith says

Pepe Carvalho is one of the most fascinating private detectives in a literary world stuffed full of eccentric detectives. For one thing he was a communist, and he worked for the CIA, and he describes himself an anarchist. He is also a gourmet cook and his recipes fill the books. (Apparently there is a spin-off book comprised of all the recipes in the series.) He also has the disconcerting habit of burning his books, either for kindling or to stimulate puzzle solving. He lives in Barcelona and his love for that city is a sustaining theme.

The Buenos Aires Quintet is either the nineteenth or the twentieth entry in the Pepe Carvalho series. (Pepe is a minor character in one book) According to one source there are nine English translations so far. Before *The Buenos Aires Quintet* I had read only *The Angst-Ridden Executive*. (La solitudine del manager)

The Buenos Aires Quintet is one of the last Pepe Carvalho novels Montalban wrote before his death in 2003. It is a much more ambitious novel than the only one I've read. A GoodReads reviewer thinks that it reenergized the series. Perhaps because it is set in Argentina and wraps itself up in the details of the military dictatorship of the 1970s, of the 30,000 "disappeared," and the first years of a new and supposedly liberal democracy. It is a shadowy and often surreal novel. The mystery is both simple and complex at the same time. Pepe is in Buenos Aires to find his cousin Raul and persuade him to return to Barcelona. Raul is found quite quickly but disappears again and again. Pepe's efforts to find him bring him into contact with a large and mysterious cast of characters all of whom are intimately concerned with Raul's fate. What is explored as the background theme is the nature of dictatorship and the wounds it left behind. This is the same issue Montalban explores in his other Pepe novels, only in those books it is the history and future of a post-Franco Spain. The novel is, as another GoodReads reviewer accurately defines it, "more like a South American novel that had a private detective as the main character."

Despite all this the novel is also charming and often humorous. There are excursions into the history of tango and many fine dinners lovingly described. Many tango lyrics are reprinted within the book and their poetry forms an alternative commentary on the events of both past and present. One of the more amusing conceits of the novel is that a famous tango singer named "Adriana Varela" performs all of the songs in the novel. Although never acknowledged Varela is a very real and very famous Buenos Aires tango singer. A second conceit equally surreal and hilarious begins in Chapter 4 - "Borges Love Child" - where a man declares himself to be the natural son of Jorge Luis Borges. The consternation and anxiety this causes among the populace is incredibly amusing. Montalban knows his Borges as quotes from the master's work fill the book.

Fascinating book that is always entertaining. The penultimate chapter, "Murder at the Gourmet Club" is the most surreal and hilarious of all. Great book. I'm happy to honor it on my exclusive shelf - Marxist Noir

flaminia says

pepe col suo cinismo dolente e mi buenos aires querido, coi suoi fantasmi, i suoi drammi, le sue ferite e i suoi interrogativi ancora aperti. bellissimo.

Dave Johnson says

Although I found the early Carvalho books fascinating...especially their insight into post-Franco Spain...I thought he ran out of steam a bit in his later books...I feel the transition to Argentina gave the character of his detective new life and the vicious background of post-dictatorship Argentina provides the necessary political context that was slipping from his books as Spain developed into a liberal democracy. Longer than most of the other books in this series I found this a well-shaped novel by a mature and gifted writer - that just happened to follow the thriller genre - but has important messages about politics, economics and humanity. The most satisfying of an enjoyable series as far as I am concerned.

Angel Serrano says

El tío de Pepe Carvalho pide a su sobrino que encuentre a Raul, su primo, en el Buenos Aires democrático. Su visita le llevará a explorar los vacíos que dejaron 30.000 desaparecidos y el tango siempre presente. Encontrará también el drama de los hijos robados.

Eva says

Creí que no lo acababa...

Charles Kerns says

If you like Latin American fiction, then you will love this. The book is labeled a mystery, but it wanders through the plot with characters who would fit as well in comic books. The plot jumps and lurches; Argentina does too. A political satire. A political horror. Ride with it.

Margaret says

Technically, I guess this is a mystery, although it read more like a South American novel that had a private detective as the main character. However, it was interesting, eventually engrossing, and more about politics, people, and history than crime. I enjoyed it, but I probably won't go out and buy another one of his books.

tENTATIVELY, cONVENIENCE says

review of

Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's The Buenos Aires Quintet

by tENTATIVELY, a cONVENIENCE - November 25-28, 2014

I think this is one of my best bk reviews. To some, it might seem excessively rambling, to me, it's scholarly.

It's also "too long" for here by a long shot so interested readers must read it here:
<https://www.goodreads.com/story/show/...>

I acquired this bk b/c the back cover's description of it begins w/ this paragraph:

"The Argentine army's "Dirty War" disappeared 30,000 people, and the last thing Pepe Carvalho wants is to investigate one of the vanished, even if that missing person is his cousin, But blood proves thicker than a fine Mondoza Cabernet Sauvignon, even for a jaded gourmand like Pepe, and so at his family's request he leaves Barcelona for Buenos Aires."

I subscribed to a magazine called "CounterSpy" in 1980 & to another magazine called "CovertAction Information Bulletin" from 1980 to 1982. Both magazines published exposés of CIA connections to oppressive regimes the world over. I remember seeing an/the editor of CounterSpy on a TV talk show defending himself for the magazine's disclosure of CIA agents info. Wikipedia states that "the 1975 murder of Richard S. Welch, the CIA Station Chief in Greece, by Revolutionary Organization 17 November was blamed by some on disclosures in magazines such as CounterSpy." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CounterS...>) CounterSpy's position was that the info they disclosed was already public knowledge & that, of course, such disclosures served positive political purposes by providing resistance to CIA covert operations.

However, it was CovertAction that really impressed me. Around 1981, I was reading its investigations into the military junta's death & torture squads in Argentina. Datings vary substantially, but for simplicity's sake, the main era of state-sponsored terrorism took place from 1976 to 1983 w/ estimates of victims varying. For the purposes of this review, 30,000 leftists were disappeared by the military during this time. CovertAction Information Bulletin (later called CovertAction Quarterly from 1992 'til its unfortunate demise in 2005) gave extremely detailed info about the tortures & murders committed by the military during this time. I found the explicitness of the terror almost unbearable to even read about.

According to Wikipedia, in 1985 "The government of Raúl Alfonsín began to develop cases against offenders. It organised a tribunal to conduct prosecution of offenders, and in 1985 the Trial of the Juntas was held. The top military officers of all the juntas were among the nearly 300 people prosecuted, and the top men were all convicted and sentenced for their crimes. This is the only Latin American example of the government conducting such trials. Threatening another coup, the military opposed subjecting more of its personnel to such trials and forced through passage of Ley de Punto Final in 1986, which "put a line" under previous actions and ended prosecutions for crimes under the dictatorship. Fearing military uprisings against them, Argentina's first two presidents inflicted punishment only to top Dirty War ex-commanders, and even then, very conservatively. Despite President Raúl Alfonsín's 1983 establishment of CONADEP, a commission to investigate the atrocities of the Dirty War, in 1986 the Ley de Punto Final (Full Stop Law) provided amnesty to Dirty War acts, stating that torturers were doing their "jobs"." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirty_War)

One of the torturers outed in CovertAction was nicknamed the "Blond Angel". Even the usually more mainstream People magazine, in their June 17, 1982, issue stated that: "After recapturing South Georgia Island, in the first step toward regaining the Falklands, British naval officers invited the defeated Argentine commander to dine aboard their warship. The prisoner, a charming, cultivated officer who spoke perfect English, identified himself as Captain Alfredo Astiz, 32. Sharing their wardroom aboard the warship while it steamed north to Ascension Island to drop off the captives, Astiz seemed to share the genteel values of his hosts. But when stories and photographs appeared in European newspapers of the stubble-bearded captain signing surrender documents, he was recognized as a man with an evil past. According to onetime political prisoners who have fled Argentina, the well-mannered captain was once the leader of an Argentine security

squad which specialized in kidnapping, torture and murder. Says exiled Argentine dissident Jacobo Timerman bitterly: "Astiz was one of the worst." (<http://www.people.com/people/archive/...>)

Despite this capture, it wasn't until 1998, 16 yrs later that he was ousted from the military:

"He was discharged from the military in 1998 after defending his actions in a press interview.

"He was a member of GT 3.3.2 (Task Force 3.3.2) based in the Naval Mechanics School (ESMA) in Buenos Aires during the Dirty War of 1976-1983. The school was adapted as a secret detention and torture center for political prisoners. As many as 5,000 political prisoners were interrogated, tortured and murdered in the ESMA during those years. GT3.3.2 was involved in some of the 8,961 deaths and other crimes documented by a national commission after the restoration of democratic government in Argentina in 1983." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_...)

The "Captain" of The Buenos Aires Quintet conducted his tortures at a Naval School: "[']We used to live in anonymous military installations that could not be identified from outside.[']" [..] "[']I never asked him about anything that I sensed was happening in the Navy Engineering School and all those other places. He told me that within twenty-four hours we had to move to an address that we could not give out even to our closest family.[']" (p 349)

I've heard from a skinhead ARA (Anti-Racist Action) friend of mine who's lived in Argentina that Astiz was recognized in an Argentina disco, probably in the early 2000s, & severely beaten. But is that enuf?! ***He's still alive*** .

"Astiz was arrested by Argentine police in July 2001. The Pardon Laws did not cover baby theft. Italy was seeking extradition of Astiz for the kidnapping and torture of three Italian nationals in 1976 and 1977, and for the theft of a baby daughter born to one of them: Angela Maria Aieta in 1976, and the kidnapping of Giovanni Pegoraro and his pregnant daughter Susana Pegoraro in 1977. It is believed that Susana gave birth in prison before her death, and Astiz arranged for her baby to be given for illegal adoption to an Argentine military family. Argentine newspapers reported at the time of Astiz's arrest that the alleged daughter was living in the port city of Mar del Plata. Astiz was not extradited." - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_...

"In 2005, Astiz was detained on charges of kidnapping and torture, centered on the 12 victims of December 1977." - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_...

As of December 20, 2008:

"Argentinean legal authorities cancelled the controversial release of Alfredo Astiz, known as the "Blond Angel of Death," only hours after the government appealed against the court decision to free him.

"AFP - Argentine legal authorities suspended a decision to release Alfredo Astiz, known as the "Blond Angel of Death" for a series of murders during the 1976-1983 military dictatorship, a day after a court ordered him freed, the official news agency Telam reported Friday.

"The announcement came barely two hours after the government said it would appeal the controversial decision to release Astiz -- accused of involvement in the disappearance of two French nuns, a Swedish adolescent and scores of political dissidents during the dictatorship's fight against leftist insurgents.

"Astiz and other former military officers are scheduled for a hearing, but a court on Thursday ordered him

released, along with another accused jailer and torturer, Jorge Acosta alias "The Tiger," on the grounds they had been detained for two years without being formally charged." - <http://www.france24.com/en/20081219-r...>

Finally, "Astiz and 17 other defendants associated with the operations at ESMA were "charged with various cases of kidnapping, torture, and murder relating to 86 victims." Following a 22-month trial, on October 27, 2011, Alfredo Astiz was convicted by an Argentinian court and sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes against humanity committed during the Dirty War." - (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfredo_...)

For me, Astiz & the too-many-others-like-him represent the ultimate nightmare of what legal society can actually endorse. While someone like Charlie Manson is in jail for life for murders he didn't even commit, people such as Lieutenant Calley (infamous mass murderer at Mai Lai) & the Blond Angel can commit crimes far, far more heinous entirely with government blessing & live relatively unmolested lives afterwards *even though their crimes are public!* Keep in mind that Reinhard Heydrich was the head of Interpol (the International Police) at the same time that he was responsible for the so-called "Final Solution" that resulted in the genocide of *millions* of people. But Charlie Manson's a 'dirty hippie' - not one of those clean-cut men in uniform.

Hence, I was very curious, indeed, to see how Montalbán wd treat such a delicate & horrifying subject as the Argentinian "Dirty War" w/in the genre of a detective novel. It wd seem that Montalbán has some relevant qualifications according to the brief bio opposite the title p: "Born in Barcelona in 1939, **MANUEL VASQUEZ MONTALBAN** (1939-2003) was a member of *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (PSUC), and was jailed by the Franco government for four years for supporting a miners' strike." Hence, if Montalbán had been in Argentina at the time of the Dirty War he might very well've been kidnapped, tortured, & murdered for being a Socialist.

Most, if not all, detective novels contrast the private investigator with the police, usually to the police's detriment. Cops are presented as stupid, narrow-minded & inflexible while PIs are more daring, more tolerant, more imaginative, & have more of a sense of humor. Whether this distinction has ever existed in real life I tend to doubt. It seems to me that detectives are overly romanticized. Montalbán approaches this in an interesting way:

"[']You're the only one who can find him. You know how to: you're a cop, aren't you?"

"'A private detective.'

"'Isn't it the same thing?"

"'The cops guarantee order. All I do is uncover disorder.'" - p 2

But what type of order is guaranteed?

"Above all, Barcelona after the Olympics, open to the sea, scored with expressways, the Barrio Chino being pulled down with indecent haste, the aeroplanes of political correctness circling the city, spraying it to kill off its bacteria, its historic viruses, its social struggles, its lumpen, a city without armpits, a city turned into a theater in which to stage the farce of modernity." - p 6

As I wrote in my RATicle entitled "Geoff Roach & Dennis Roddy - Dilemma for democracy!" (Street Ratbag #6, September, 2002):

"A few months before the Olympics were to take place in Australia, Melbourne columnist Geoff Roach wrote:

""Let's say you are in charge of security for the Sydney Olympics, perish the thought. What would you want done with that cretinous pest Peter Hore?

""Lots of things, we're sure, including at the very least placing the idiot in some sort of detention facility for the period immediately before, during and after the Games. Anywhere, in fact, where he would be totally unable to inflict his obnoxious presence on proceedings. Such a prospect is, of course, unthinkable in our civilized society, though in scores of other countries, many of whom preach the loudest about human rights while practicing something entirely contrary, it would be done as a matter of course."

"Hmmm... That's food for thought, isn't it? It's suggested that Hore, a person known for grabbing media attention by intruding into large public events, be put into preventative detention or *worse*. Well, there're alotof large public events. How often might it be 'necessary' to do this to him? And would he have any say in the matter?

"Roach qualifies this by writing that such a step is "unthinkable in our (ie: Australian) civilized society" but, nonetheless, he's put the proposal out there hasn't he? As for the "scores of other countries" where such a practice wouldn't be "unthinkable", would Spain during the Fascist Franco dictatorship have been one of them?

"That brings us to an interesting connection. Juan Antonio Samaranch, President of the International Olympic Committee, the highest ruling body of the Olympics, for 21 years from 1980 to 2001, was ALSO the government secretary, under Franco, in charge of sports. The Olympics have always been popular with oppressive regimes.

"It's not exactly coincidental that Leni Riefenstahl's 1934 magnum opus "Triumph of the Will", a major propaganda film for the nazis, was followed by her 1936 'hit' "Olympia" (about the Olympics, of course).

"It's also not coincidental that the brilliant author Georges Perec, both of whose parents were killed when he was a child by the nazis, places his novel "W or the Memory of Childhood" partially in a mythical island off Tierra del Fuego governed by the thrall of the Olympic 'ideal,' where losers are tortured and winners held in temporary idolatry," as the book-jacket blurb describes it.

"The 1st people the nazis killed en masse were the so-called 'insane'. Having met Peter Hore & videotaped him, I think he could be pigeonholed as 'schizophrenic'. I quite liked him. The nazis would've certainly had no problem killing him or putting him into preventative detention to protect the Olympian 'ideal' from his 'degeneracy'. No thanks. Personally, I'd rather say "bye-byes" to the Olympics instead." - pp 158-159

It's the same old story at every Olympics or other international gathering of the rich & powerful: get rid of anything the tourists might see that might tarnish an image of 'perfection' that not everyone believes in or wishes to support or be forced to participate in. The "Barrio Chino" of Barcelona might've been a slum but cdn't the 'city fathers' have spent the money used to tear it down to improve the quality-of-life there instead & lived up to a standard of social 'perfection' more humane than anything the Olympics are likely to ever represent?! I think Olympic athletes are potentially admirable - but I think they're most admirable when they raise their fists in solidarity w/ black American struggles against racism & oppression. If Peter Hore is a thorn in the side of false images of community-contentedness then so be it. Thank you Peter.

This bk was published in the original Spanish in 1997. It appears to've been written as if the action is taking place in that time period - a yr before The Blond Angel of Death was dismissed from the military (but otherwise still unscathed) for publicly defending his role as a kidnapper, torturer & murderer.

"It all happened twenty years ago. We were already one year into the military government and what had at first seemed like just another routine coup had clearly turned into a "dirty war". We heard news of all the atrocities being committed. Torture. Disappearances. I wasn't really involved, but my wife, my sister-in-law, Raúl and Roberto decided to draw up a detailed report on mental and physical resistance to pain and brutality. They had been working on it for years. They knew everything about pain in rats so they drew up a comprehensive list of situations. They looked at every possible variable that could help resist interrogation.["]" - p 67

The Blond Angel was, no doubt, upholding an 'ideal of perfection' - just like the Olympics do - it just happened to be an ideal that justified the cruelest of crimes against people whose idea of 'perfection' was much different than what he believed in.
