



Texas: The Great Theft

Carmen Boullosa , Samantha Schnee (Translation)

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"Mexico's greatest woman writer."—Roberto Bolaño

"A luminous writer . . . Boullosa is a masterful spinner of the fantastic"—*Miami Herald*

An imaginative writer in the tradition of Juan Rulfo, Jorge Luis Borges, and Cesar Aira, Carmen Boullosa shows herself to be at the height of her powers with her latest novel. Loosely based on the little-known 1859 Mexican invasion of the United States, *Texas* is a richly imagined evocation of the volatile Tex-Mex borderland. Boullosa views border history through distinctly Mexican eyes, and her sympathetic portrayal of each of her wildly diverse characters—Mexican ranchers and Texas Rangers, Comanches and cowboys, German socialists and runaway slaves, Southern belles and dancehall girls—makes her storytelling tremendously powerful and absorbing.

Shedding important historical light on current battles over the Mexican–American frontier while telling a gripping story with Boullosa's singular prose and formal innovation, *Texas* marks the welcome return of a major writer who has previously captivated American audiences and is poised to do so again.

Carmen Boullosa (b. 1954) is one of Mexico's leading novelists, poets, and playwrights. Author of seventeen novels, her books have been translated into numerous world languages. Recipient of numerous prizes and honors, including a Guggenheim fellowship, Boullosa is currently Distinguished Lecturer at City College of New York.

Samantha Schnee is founding editor and chairman of the board of *Words Without Borders*. She has also been a senior editor with *Zoetrope*, and her translations have appeared in the *Guardian*, *Granta*, and the *New York Times*.

Texas: The Great Theft Details

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From Reader Review Texas: The Great Theft for online ebook

Gabrielo Garibay says

Es una de las novelas más accesible y divertidas de Boullosa. Toma como ingredientes los hechos históricos pero tiene una manera tan maestra de combinarlos con la ficción que el resultado es muy gratificante. Hoy en día da miedo invocar a La Imaginación. Hoy en día todo tiene que ser trágico y "real" para considerarse serio. No es así. La literatura, alta literatura de Boullosa transplanta la historia a su propio planeta. Y su planeta literario es rico en Historia y Ficción. Esto es un ejemplo de que la literatura tiene que ser creativa. Por supuesto que existen muy buenos libros que copian o retratan la realidad con maestría. Carmen Boullosa no la ignora, no recrea sino que Crea su mundo.

En particular, Texas, va a galope, no paras. Yo no paré de reír. Y tiene personajes maravillosos. Me parece que lo que ha creado polémica es el final y esa sensación de querer saber más de los personajes. Aquí otra cosa que disfruté de la novela: me parece que para Boullosa no es necesario llevarnos de la mano hacia el final pues se intuye. Boullosa descabalga de un salto a punto de llegar al final y nos deja ahí. Ya sabremos nosotros si lo gozamos o nos quedamos frustrados. Es fácil leerla pero no es fácil leerla. Se tiene que permitir el lector entrar a su planeta. y si tan solo se disfruta del viaje y el paisaje, de verdad queda uno con una sonrisa grata.

jeremy says

with a colorful and lively ensemble cast, mexican novelist carmen boullosa offers a fictionalized account of the 1859 first cortina war. *texas: the great theft*, while beautifully crafted, at times suffers from a surfeit of characters and over-exposition. flirting with the fringes of magical realism, however, boullosa's tale is a rollicking re-imagining of the mid-19th century border skirmish set along the rio grande.

"if we don't get rid of them, before we know it they'll pass a law preventing us from working on the other side of the río bravo, not just poor folks, but all mexicans. as for property... you've seen how they respect it, the gringos all have silver tongues. we ain't seen nothing yet, the worst is still to come. they'll put up a fence or build a wall so we can't cross over to 'their' texas... as if it were theirs!... and then, you'll see, listen closely, they'll take the water from our river, they'll divert it for their own purposes, who knows how they'll do it... but you'll see! they'll take everything we have... there won't be a single mustang or a plot of land they don't claim as theirs. south of the rio bravo will become violent. mexicans will begin to treat each other with the same contempt... our women will be raped and butchered and buried in pieces in the desert."

*translated from the spanish by samantha schnee (words without borders)

**boullosa's *texas* is the inaugural release from deep vellum, a promising, non-profit publisher of literary translation based in dallas.

Sami says

The Spanish-English translation is superb! Unfortunately, I did read this novel while distracted, so I don't

remember the details. The format jumps through various characters and that was difficult to follow.

Julia Carpenter says

A totally different sort of reading experience. Just go with the flow, don't try to remember who all the characters are. It was helpful to read some *about* the book. A very interesting perspective from the Mexican point of view.

Charles Dee Mitchell says

For native Texans, "The Great Theft" component of this novel's title could be substituted with "The Great Corrective," or even "The Great Slap in the Face." I was officially taught Texas history decades ago in elementary school, and I am sure what I learned was as myth-fueled as accounts of U.S. history that include George Washington chopping down the cherry tree. Over the years, I have picked up a more realistic view of how this state developed and I assume that what is taught in schools has shifted somewhat closer to reality. But Boullosa's novel, set in 1859 on the Texas/Mexican border, presents the land grab at the birth of this state for exactly what it was. By the time of the novel, with Texas a part of the United States, the American citizens living in Bruneville (Brownville today) are distinguished by their avarice, racism, casual violence, and devotion to slavery.

The Fist Cortina War of 1859 is the historical incident from which Boullosa spins her tale. Her fictionalization involves some historical facts, some slight name changes, and a large cast of minor characters who provide a kaleidoscopic view of the events. When the local sheriff, a predictable lowlife character, pistol whips an elderly Mexican for public drunkenness, the scion of a distinguished Mexican family intervenes. The sheriff calls him a "dirty greaser" and gets shot in the leg for the insult. The ramifications of that moment play out over a period of a few days in scenes that are alternately tragic, comic, enraging, and often hard to follow.

For the first third of Boullosa's novel, I couldn't pretend to keep up with the characters, most of whom tended to make repeated brief appearances many pages apart. But once she has set her elaborate stage, Boullosa settles into some grand storytelling. I suppose the awkward term "tragi-comedy" can be applied to this novel, but the story is best left unlabelled. After her microscopic study of a few days in a border town, the author concludes with five pages summarizing the future lives of her characters. Her "Author's Note" confirms that her theme all along has been a sweeping view of how history happens.

World Literature Today says

"Through the intricate plot and multitude of characters, both principal and peripheral, Carmen Boullosa's novel *Texas* seems to score a direct hit... Yet the plot tends to get lost in the central plains of her novel, which detracts from a satisfying reading experience." - Janet Mary Livesey, University of Oklahoma

This book was reviewed in the May 2013 issue of *World Literature Today*. Read the full review by visiting our website: <http://bit.ly/ZwBisa>

Kobe Bryant says

Like the GTA 4 trailer said, might is right

Adal says

Le pondría 2.5 estrellas mas no existe esta opción. Pocas veces soy tan duro con un libro en su reseña pero debo confesar que realmente no me gustó. En general se me hace pretencioso y siento que no hay una línea narrativa clara durante toda la obra. Si bien es cierto que el tema es fascinante y siento retrata de manera muy efectiva la situación social de la época, en especial el sistema esclavista del que inclusive los mismos Texanos han decidido ignorar de sus libros de historia, la autora falla en desarrollar un personaje. En mi opinión personal es una verborrea de incontables personajes a los que nunca llegas a conocer ni mucho menos a entender. Existían tantas posibilidades de desarrollar personajes que resultaban atractivos, que por seguir un estilo que no es de mi agrado, nunca llegas a engancharte con alguno. Si bien, todo esto es percepción mía y quizá otras personas realmente les agrade la obra, yo nunca llegué a conocer a Don Nepomuceno y por lo tanto a preocuparme por su destino.

Audrey Schoeman says

‘Texas: The Great Theft’ begins with a straightforwardly told encounter: the Sheriff of Bruneville (a small town on the Texan-Mexican border) ‘spits five words at Don Nepomuceno:

“Shut up, you dirty greaser.”’

The story is set in 1859, at the time of the Mexican-American border wars, and this encounter is the spark that lights the tinderbox of north-south relations. We follow the news as it spreads around town, and its consequences begin to unfurl, moving with it from one house or market stand to the next, and as we go we meet a varied cast of characters. Almost everyone in Bruneville, and a goodly chunk of the population of its Mexican ‘sister town’, Matasanchez, has their part to play in this story, be they an errand boy, a baker or a vacquero (cowboy). As the word spreads, we prepare for a revolt, and clear lines are drawn through Bruneville’s society.

The story is told through an omniscient narrator who whirls us from place to place and person to person, unfurling the inner workings of the town. No-one’s secret thoughts are safe. We learn about incest and abuse, about cowardice and violence, dreams of escape and dreams of power. Through it all the narrator builds a sense of urgency, using the short stay with each character to convey the passing of time, repeatedly telling us that there is more to share about an individual or a piece of gossip, but that we are out of time, we must move on to the next place and the next character, following the news as it spreads; or, conversely, allowing longer digressions to fill in background as the pace of events slows down. It’s cleverly done.

The sly humour and the power of the language do a good job of alleviating the weight of a period of history characterized by racism and brutality, and Boullosa has carefully counterweighted the dominant racism of the nascent Americans against the Mexicans by displaying the similar historic prejudice of the Mexicans

against the native Indians – the story of dispossession has played out on these lands before. And even the Indians are not romanticized, as is made clear in their harsh life, violence, and treatment of women. This is not a morality tale, and there are no clear heroes. Instead there is a gritty, messy, eminently readable story of a period in history that many would prefer to imagine is more clear cut. This was the first book from new publishing house Deep Vellum, and it's my first read from them. Judging by this, I'm expecting great things!

Full review available at <http://goodbyetoallthis.com/texas-the...>

Juan says

A remarkable book that tells the so hidden truth of American expansion in the west through her eyes and words. A must read.

claire says

Really 2.5 - 2.75 ??

I enjoyed the history, particularly the alternative perspective from what I learned in school, in Texas.

There were moments of beautiful, lyrical language -- is that Boullosa or the translator or a combination?

However, I never did settle into the story. The omniscient POV was, at times, useful and effective. Mostly though, the story felt disjointed due to all the switching between characters. SO many characters that I had to start over three times to try to keep it all straight. I finally gave up and just read through.

I liked the book well enough to try another Boullosa book.

Michelle Lancaster says

Texas: the Great Theft by Carmen Boullosa
Translated from the Spanish by Samantha Schnee
Deep Vellum Publishing
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\$15.95, 285 pgs

Once upon a time in Texas, there was a man perturbed, even aghast, by the rarity of contemporary translations of literature in this country. Thus was born Deep Vellum Publishing. Deep Vellum, based in Dallas, released its first title today. Woo hoo! Congratulations all around. And what a debut it is: Texas: the Great Theft by Carmen Boullosa, translated from the Spanish by Texan Samantha Schnee of Words Without Borders fame. Her translation from the Spanish is inspired: chatty, cleverly colloquial and full of energy.

One day in 1859 in the Texas town of Bruneville (aka Brownsville), Don Nepomuceno witnesses the local sheriff pistol-whipping a drunken vaquero in the town square. When Nepomuceno confronts the sheriff, the sheriff insults him, "Shut up, you dirty greaser." The news of this insult spreads rapidly along both banks of the Rio Grande/Bravo via what resembles a giant game of telephone, assisted by messenger pigeon and

lightning bolt. The town is of two minds about this. On the one hand, “How could a puffed up carpenter dare speak that way to Don Nepomuceno, Doña Estefanía’s son, the grandson and great-grandson of the owners of more than a thousand acres, including those on which Bruneville sits?!” And on the other hand, “Nepomuceno, that no-good, goddamned, cattle-thieving, red-headed bandit, he can rot in hell for all I care!” Shots ring out. The sheriff is wounded and Nepomuceno, taking the old vaquero with him, escapes across the river to Matasánchez, Mexico (aka Matamoros) where he proceeds to make plans for an invasion of Texas.

Boullosa has taken an incident from the fraught and bloody history of Texan/Mexican/American relations and woven a generous tale full of magic and the all-too-human, reminiscent of *Revolt* by Qaisra Sharaz and John Nichols’ *The Milagro Beanfield War*. The cast of characters in the two towns are a motley and varied crew, representative of the actual historical residents of the region (I swear – look it up): Mexicans, Texans, Native Americans, socialist Germans, escaped slaves, a commune of a dozen Amazons (yes, you read that correctly), Cubans, Russians, Irishmen, ghosts, espionage agents, agents provocateurs, mystics and one philosopher-baker.

Texas is a delight, packed with sly wit, word-play and sharp observation. The omniscient narrator regularly addresses the reader directly, as actors will address the camera and speak to the audience, poking a sharp stick at absurdity with a deadpan delivery that had me laughing aloud. For instance, when describing the locals, “...two madmen (Connecticut, who only says “I’m from Connecticut,” and the Scot, who says lots but in his country’s strange accent it’s impossible to understand, which is just as well, because his babbling is full of obscenities),...” And this, “Jones never stops for Father Vera, he’s not stupid and he knows that the priest dislikes him and thinks he’s a heretic because he’s read the whole Bible from cover to cover several times (proof to the priest that Jones is a damned Protestant).”

There are doses of the magic realism for which Mexican literature is famous. For instance, the local mystic is hailed by a fence post:

“Psst, Iluminado!”

El Iluminado thinks the voice is coming from the ruined fence...

“I’m going to help you. Make me your cross and I will speak the Word to all.”

The voice is sharp and childish, no one would believe it’s coming from this old piece of wood.

Without asking anyone’s permission El Iluminado yanks up the talking board...

“That’s right! Well done! Now nail the board next to me, crosswise.”

“What nails should I use?”

“We’re going to get some at the store.”

“I don’t have any money, and Señor Bartolo doesn’t give credit.”

“I’ll talk to him. Let’s go!”

The results of the talking cross? “The line that beggars and believers have formed to bless themselves with the holy water where the (miraculous) Talking Cross was dunked snakes all the way to the Town Hall.”

Boullosa is also skilled at the quirkily pastoral, “Although it’s nearly settled, they won’t announce it until dawn, after a nightlong vigil discussing the matter in darkness, to the hooting of owls, the dreaming of foxes, the nighttime wiggling of fish.” She infuses even a description of the spies passing messages with her unique style, “In passing, they utter phrases to balconies that appear to be empty. In the confessionals, they confess sins that aren’t sins, and their confessors aren’t priests. The barber repeats them in the middle of conversations, like non sequiturs. Lovers say things that aren’t at all loving.”

Texas, despite the subject matter, is not a plot-driven thriller. It doesn’t move quickly – if you’re looking for a lot of battle action then you should look elsewhere. What Texas has are characters and language; history that continues to impact Texas and Mexico that we might otherwise prefer to avoid; and an intelligent and stylish delivery that points out the abundant absurdities and hypocrisies. This book is to be savored, not

gulped. Texas will reward your patience. Do not make the mistake of thinking this is all fun and games. I've dwelt on the humor and magic in this review because they are the unique and most impressive qualities. People die here and swing like strange fruit; people lose their land, homes, families, livelihoods and traditional ways of living and these sins haunt us still in news headlines daily.

I will leave you with a prophecy from the philosopher-baker:

"If we don't get rid of them, before we know it they'll pass a law preventing us from working on the other side of the Río Bravo...the worst is still to come. They'll put up a fence or build a wall so we can't cross over to 'their' Texas...and then, you'll see, listen closely, they'll take the water from our river, they'll divert it for their own purposes,...there won't be a single mustang or plot of land they don't claim as theirs. South of the Río Bravo will become violent. Mexicans will begin to treat each other with the same contempt...Our women will be raped and butchered and buried in pieces in the desert."

"Go and drink your chocolate, Óscar, you're talking nonsense."

¡Viva la Raza!

David Tomlinson says

I'm a huge fan of Deep Vellum Publishing. Its books and its mission are both top shelf. Having said that, this book just doesn't work for me. Too much stage-setting, not enough story-telling. I'm not sure if it's a good story told in a manner too clever by half or simply not a good story, but either way it doesn't grab the reader the way most Deep Vellum and other good books do.

Caroline says

Boulossa achieves the amazing goal of immersing you in a cast of 190 named characters so that as events unfold in the border troubles of 1859, you participate as if you belonged to all segments of the community. Each individual has both an assigned trade--butcher, vaquero, innkeeper--and a political role they choose or find thrust upon them. (Women are important characters here, so I'm going to use the less-than-desirable 'they' rather than 'he'.) That is, while the conflict is sparked by gringo attitudes and confiscation aimed at the Mexicans, at every moment you are aware that 'the Gringos' are individuals both perpetrating the violence and suffering from its the side effects, as are the American Indian tribes, the Mexicans, and the blacks--both slave and free-- groups of individuals. These 190 separate people matter.

For me the most astounding thing was that by virtue of the care she takes to situate each character in commerce and relationship as she introduces him or her, you can keep them straight. It also helped that I wrote down every single one as I encountered them, but I rarely had to refer to my notes. Somehow you cared about each person, even though you only spent a few sentences or paragraphs with them. The tone is detached and semi-fantastic at the same time, with embedded stories providing background about the longstanding and pervasive violence in the region.

The story itself begins with an upper class Mexican American who is insulted and won't take it any longer. But this is really about the backstory of land confiscation and general doubledealing in Texas, where the original gringo settlers seized the land they had been given by the Mexican government and created an independent country, then joined the United States as a slave state, then took to stealing what the Mexicans

had left in the region. By chance (sort of) I am reading Ulysses S Grant's memoirs simultaneously. His first battle experience was on exactly the ground of this novel, what is now Brownsville Texas, across the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo) from Matamoros, Mexico. These events take place about 10 years later, after the US had invaded Mexico, won Mexican cessation of Texas, California, etc, and the wild west was in full operation. The slave trade and recapture business is important, because Texans could own slaves but Mexico granted their freedom if they made it across the river.

Boullosa is brutal in her portrayal of gringo attitudes about the characters and capabilities of Mexicans, blacks and American Indians. The main character shapes a coalition from these rejected groups to fight back. I leave you to guess whether he wins or loses. Based on the author's note at the back, there is some factual basis for the story. There was a Robin Hood who organized L Raza and occupied Brownsville. Boullosa also says she borrowed characters from Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and films, but I wasn't attuned to catch them.

Boullosa apparently writes frequently about women's issues, and the women here are crucial. Many are victims, but some are using the flexible rules of the frontier to carve out different lives for themselves. In general, though, you wouldn't have wanted to be a woman on the frontier.

I recommend this highly. She is definitely an accomplished writer, using interesting techniques to weave your immersive experience. Occasionally the cliched character or image clunks (e.g. the hysterical wife of the main institutional thief) but most of the writing is wonderful. And the names are great--it's quite clear who are the heroes and who the villains. Said wealth institutional thief using the courts to effect his confiscations is named Stealman, for example. Sounds heavy handed, but packing in 190 characters gives you a pass on helping the reader decide where they belong quickly. I'm wavering between 4 and 5; 4 for now.

Tuck says

learn how texicans expand their might and power in 1859 border region of brownsville/matamoros

funny, disgusting, full of intrigue and power plays, a good way to get your history lessons/lessons
