

By Night in Chile: the Universe of Roberto Bolaño

Roberto Bolaño was a Chilean poet who turned to fiction writing at the end of his life. He fled Chile for Mexico and Spain when Pinochet took power, and he died of liver failure in 2003. Taken together, the novels and short stories he wrote in the last ten years of his life are one of the great achievements of modern literature, and his major work, *2666*, is surely the best novel of our young century. The themes of his work – exile, violence, poetry, fascism, youth, crime – connect all of his books into a single, sprawling text. My collection contains every book by Bolaño that has been translated into English, plus the short biography and interview collection by journalist Mónica Maristain. The highlight of the collection is the pair of editions of *2666*.

The first book I read by Bolaño was *The Savage Detectives*, a novel about poets and courage. I bought it on a whim after reading a positive review. Reading *The Savage Detectives* was so exhilarating that immediately upon putting it down, I drove to the nearest bookstore and bought every other Bolaño book they had on the shelf. My experience reading *The Savage Detectives* was surpassed only by reading the novel *2666*, which I read next. Before even finishing *2666*, I'd bought a copy for all my friends and convinced them to read it too. Why is it such a compelling book? *2666* manages to be a Latin American, American, German, and Russian novel all at once. It reckons with the literature and violence of the last century and plots a course through the darkness of our own.

No author means more to me than Roberto Bolaño. I have read every word of his fiction that has been translated into English, and I am convinced he is the great writer of the close of the 20th Century and beginning of the 21st. I would not trade this collection for the collected works of any author.

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Annotated List:

Bolaño, Roberto. *2666*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2009. Print.

Bolaño, Roberto. *2666*. New York: St Martin's Press, 2009. Print.

The Farrar, Straus, and Giroux edition is divided into three volumes and has a slipcase. The other is a single volume hardcover. *2666* took on new significance for me when I traveled to the Goodman Theater in Chicago to see it adapted for the stage in a monumental 5-hour performance. In keeping with the maximalist nature of the novel, I saw the play twice. If given the choice of two books for life on a deserted island, I would choose my two copies of *2666*, in case one should get wet.

Bolaño, Roberto. *A Little Lumpen Novelita*. United States: New Directions Publishing, 2016. Print.

A haunting novella set in Italy; despite its short size, New Directions published it in a charming hardcover edition. I found this on the discount cart at the St. John's bookstore.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Amulet*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2008. Print.

Amulet tells the story of a woman who hides in a bathroom during the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968, when soldiers killed hundreds of students in Mexico City.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Antwerp*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2010. Print.

Antwerp is an early prose poem. It is fragmented and difficult work but has all the themes of his later work present in it.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Between Parentheses: Essays, Articles, and Speeches, 1998-2003*. Edited by Ignacio Echevarria. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2014. Print.

This is an 'advanced reading copy' for the first hardcover edition. It is the only collection of Bolaño's non-fiction. He discusses literature and his life in short essays full of digressions and harsh judgments. A perfect book.

Bolaño, Roberto. *By Night in Chile*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2004. Print.

A single book-length paragraph without punctuation – in a stylistic ode to Thomas Bernhard – that tells the story of a priest in Chile after Pinochet's coup and the relationship between literature and torture. I return to this novel often and always find new political and moral lessons.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Distant Star*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2004. Print.

Fascism and evil are recurring themes in Bolaño's fiction. *Distant Star* is a novel about a fascist poet and murderer in Pinochet's Chile. It is my favorite of Bolaño's short novels.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Last Evenings on Earth*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2007. Print.

A collection of short stories. The autobiographical title story is near perfection.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Monsieur Pain*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2010. Print.

Monsieur Pain is a noir novel set in France about a new age healer treating the Peruvian poet César Vallejo for a case of incurable hiccups. Vallejo is a tragic figure; he was accomplished poet who became a Stalinist and moved to Europe, where he died penniless. This novel is unsettling and inconclusive (but intentionally so).

Bolaño, Roberto. *Nazi Literature in the Americas*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2009. Print.
These fictional biographies of fascist writers are the best example of the influence of Borges on Bolaño. The protagonist of *Distant Star* first appears here.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Insufferable Gaucho*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2010. Print.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Return*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2010. Print.
The Insufferable Gaucho and *The Return* are story collections. The highlight of the latter is the story "Prefiguration of Lalo Cura," which tells the backstory of a notable character in 2666.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Romantic Dogs: 1980-1998*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2008. Print.
Bolaño always considered himself first and foremost a poet. There are some fine poems in this collection, chief among them "Godzilla in Mexico," a poem about a father and son facing death.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Savage Detectives*. New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.
Where my obsession began! In many ways, *The Savage Detectives* is Bolaño's most formally experimental novel. It tells the story of young poets in Mexico who try and fail to *live* literature, not just to write it.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Secret of Evil*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2012. Print.
A posthumous collection of stories, essays, and fragments.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Skating Rink*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2009. Print.
Bolaño's first novel: a detective story set in a coastal town in Spain.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Third Reich: A Novel*. New York: Picador USA, 2012. Print.
The title of *The Third Reich* refers to a war strategy board game, not the Nazi regime. The English translation was initially published serially in the *Paris Review*. Of all his books, this is the most dissimilar to the others, in content and style.

Bolaño, Roberto. *The Unknown University*. United States: New Directions Publishing, 2013. Print.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Tres*. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2011. Print.
More poetry! *Tres* is mostly prose poems, and *The Unknown University* collects his poems and fragments not published elsewhere. I received the latter as a gift in late 2015.

Bolaño, Roberto. *Woes of the True Policeman*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Print.
A novel-length work about the character Óscar Amalfitano, who appears in 2666. A minor work.

Maristain, Mónica. *Bolaño: A Biography*. New York: Melville House Publishing, 2014. Print.

Maristain, Mónica. *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview & Other Conversations*. New York: Melville House Publishing, 2009. Print.
These are books of interest only for a true Bolaño devotee. Since I am such a devotee, I found them extremely interesting.