

Hope and Horror in El Salvador

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ONE DAY OF LIFE. *By Manlio Argueta. Translated by Bill Brow. Aventura/Vintage. 215 pp. \$6.95.*

In *One Day of Life*, Salvadoran novelist Manlio Argueta sets himself an enormous task: to describe the birth of a sense of self-worth in the poorest of his country's poor.

Argueta focuses on a single day in the life of Lupe, a middle-aged peasant woman in Chalate, a dusty farming village a stone's throw from San Salvador. The story is shot through with memories and voices: her own, those of her children, grandchildren and neighbors and those of several local boys, members now of the National Guard. The year must be 1977 or 1978, the period when the Christian Federation of Farmworkers (FECCAS), after making some progress toward land reform, became a prime target of state terrorism.

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Argueta crisply depicts Chalate's harrowing poverty. Children die painfully of dehydration, their parents unable to afford the worm medicine that would easily cure them. High interest rates make it impossible for farm workers to borrow enough to buy even a few handfuls of seeds; when they gather, unarmed, in front of a bank to protest, they are slaughtered by the National Guard.

One evening the guards take away Lupe's son, a FECCAS organizer. In the morning his head is atop a fence, his body far away in the hills. "Look how they left all that I had," Lupe's daughter-in-law whispers. The guardsmen come back. This time they bring the broken body of Lupe's husband and hold him half-dead, within her reach. She turns away from him to the guardsmen and denies that she recognizes the man, thus saving herself and her family, at least for now: "At that moment your good eye opened, the one they had left you. . . . Your coffee-colored eyes, the same ones I had seen with my pair for more than thirty years. . . . You were saying, 'Thank you, Lupe.'" She muses afterward, "His companions will go look for him, with the animals in the air as their guide, the buzzards that fly in

circles, gliding slowly, watching with their all-seeing eyes.”

One Day of Life contains as much hope as horror, however, for the people of Chalate are beginning to believe in change. The ability to judge, to question, heretofore buried under homilies to resignation and fear of damnation, is coming to life, and with it a sense of outrage. Thus, the villagers round up some guardsmen and force them to dig a grave for Lupe's decapitated son and then to pray over his body.

There are a number of such stunning scenes scattered throughout, yet the action is usually more fluid than the language in which it is depicted. Voices that are eloquent when describing atrocities can become wooden when discussing FECCAS. Characterizations and relationships are flattened, usurped by FECCAS jargon. The voices of the Guard, by contrast, are always substantial, always believable. With remarkable economy, Argueta traces the steps by which one begins to torture old friends, and these haunting, desperate scenes are among the novel's finest. The Guard aside, we get too few vivid details of daily life in Chalate. A fistful come to mind: a clay whistle for a child's Christmas, the lard soap which Lupe uses to soften her hair. Those few make one hungry for more—hungry to know how life as well as struggle continues in El Salvador.

Those who equate Latin American novels with elastic narration and lush imagery will find work of another order here. This is not a sophisticated novel. Its brilliance is in recording a political moment, and to some extent what that moment meant to one community.

After the murder of San Salvador's Archbishop Oscar Romero in 1980, the large-scale nonviolent protests chronicled in the novel were called off—they were considered suicidal. The novel itself was banned in El Salvador soon after its publication in 1980. FECCAS cannot now be said to exist. Its officers are in exile, as is Argueta, or have joined guerrilla armies, and the hope for peaceful change recorded here seems to have been smashed. Perhaps the real heartbreak of *One Day of Life* lies just beyond it. □