BOOK REVIEW

Debut novelist shines in the 'Damn Tropics'

Life in the Damn Tropics
by David Unger,
University of Wisconsin
Press, 301 pages.

Reviewed by Brian Levinson

Life in the Damn Tropics, David Unger's first novel, is the story of a divided family in a divided country. Guatemala in the early 1980s is on the verge of civil war, its fabric stretched thin by soldiers and civilians, conservatives and liberals, white-skinned elite and long-oppressed Indians.

The political chaos creates turmoil within a rich Jewish family in Guatemala City. Marcos Eltaleph, the immature playboy, remains the idealist (in thought more than action), while his brother and nephew turn increasingly conservative. And because wealthy Jews do not exactly win popularity contests in revolutionary Latin America, the Eltalephs must simultaneously worry about protecting their lives and the family-owned corporation.

This all makes for an engrossing piece of historical fiction, and during a period in time that often goes uncovered. Outside interest in Guatemala is generally limited to a Lonely Planet tourist guide. Some might remember the 1954 as a particularly flagrant imperialist foul, when the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz was toppled by U.S.-backed military coup.

As for the 1980s, Guatemala is too often viewed as just another war-ravaged chapter in Central America's so-called "lost decade." But Unger shines an important spotlight on this period. More than just a trampling ground for Cold War powers, Guatemala was filled with entangling alliances, wildly diverse demographies, and personal histories that would put a Mexican *telenovela* to shame.

Marcos, the narrator, is 53 years old and undergoing a kind of character development normally reserved for people half his age. After years of "whore-hopping," he has finally found love and a reason to settle down. Nevertheless, he remains the cushily-paid, rubber-stamping executive at his family's corporation. And his business instincts are as faulty as ever. He opens a fancy nightclub with his girlfriend Esperanza just as the Guatemalan economy begins to tank, and the place is gradually coopted by a shady and politically connected army colonel.

Unger's book is rich and well-researched. Perhaps the only criticism is how it has been reviewed by others. A blurb on the back cover notes the book is "enlivened by innocent eroticism and comic absurdity," which is not exactly correct. Unger orchestrates a realistic plot, packed with sharp and witty dialogue that remains quite grounded.

Even the book's forward, written by Nicaraguan Gioconda Belli, is misleading. She describes Marcos as a Guatemalan Portnoy, which is a careless literary allusion. Just because a Jewish character has too much sex does not put him on par with Philip Roth's notorious Alex Portnoy.

Marcos is not a perversed product of an overbearing mother

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or a pressure-filled childhood. Rather he misinterprets sex as a kind of carnal cure-all for an imperfect world. "Marcos, you think sex is the solution to nuclear war!" says one friend. His development throughout the book — finding real love and understanding the passion of things other than sex — illustrates the point.

Those looking for an interesting Jewish angle to the book might find it in the shaky, almost inverse relationship between wealth and morality. This is a universal theme, to be sure, but one that strikes an interesting chord with Jews. Owing to their history of oppression in societies dominated by others, Jews have always had a traditionally leftist bent. This begins to change, however, with the accumulation of money and social status.

It is not that upwardly mobile Jews become evil capitalists, but rather they are confronted with moral questions that have no easy answer. In the case of the Eltaleph brothers, who have worked to build a large corporation, they must find a way to walk that tightrope between rightfully defending one's property and coming to terms with the historical injustices that have given birth to insurrections in the region.

The best passage in the book is shared by Marcos and his brother-in-law Samuel at a family wedding. Grumpy old Samuel is the moral conscience of the family, the one who retains a historical memory. Surveying the wedding party, he laments the dirty business practices of some of the invitees, or that others maintain financial ties with ex-Nazis. Basically, Samuel can not understand how, after generations of ethical behavior, the Eltalephs and other Jewish families have begun to cut corners — dabbling in corruption, ignoring human rights violations if it helps their bottom line — even if this is the norm in Guatemala City.

But Samuel is a huge pain in the ass. He complains at all the wrong times. He makes people angry and uncomfortable. Even his wife gets fed up with his behavior. By including him in the story, if only for a brief moment, Unger is making a very important point: that in modern life, and especially modern life in the damn tropics, the voice of reason is not soft and operatic. It is crude and biting and hard to listen to. You try and block it out, call it senile, and run away from it during the cocktail hour at your niece's glitzy wedding. ❑