

[**HARDCOVER:** US]

To America! But only for the men

BY **ALEXANDER CUADROS**
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, SAN FRANCISCO
Publishers love it when their authors get compared to literary greats in the book pages. A reviewer on deadline will toss off a Faulkner or a Fitzgerald, hoping it'll be forgotten by Monday, like most of the copy, but then that little line will resurface in news releases and the paperback's "praise pages" until it becomes a part of the publisher's institutional memory and the author's permanent brand.

In the case of Luis Alberto Urrea's 2004 novel *The Hummingbird's Daughter*, it was enough for the book to be a long family epic written by a Latino (Urrea is Mexican American) for reviewers to cry Gabriel Garcia Marquez. May differences in style and substance be damned. They even compared him to Jorge Luis Borges, about as far from the Colombian master as you can get.

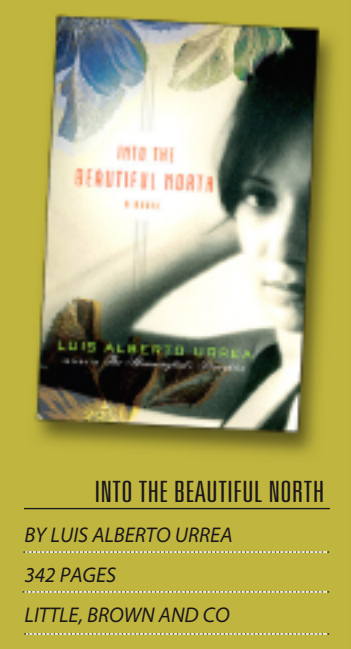
In his new novel, *Into the Beautiful North*, Urrea let the champagne bubbles go to his head. He echoes the famous opening line from Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the second paragraph, a glib mirroring: "Until 1936, ice came in big trucks, and fathers took their sons to observe it when it slid down the ramps in great clear blocks." (The original speaks of "that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice.") The bar for contemporary fiction shouldn't normally be ratcheted up to this level, but it is Urrea who invites the unflattering comparison — and Garcia Marquez would never have written lines as twee as this: "Garcia-Garcia had a treat for them: cartoons!"

So here's what the novel is about. Nayeli, a 19-year-old girl whose village in Sinaloa is beset by bandits, decides to cross the border — not to escape but to repatriate the Mexican men who've gone north so that they can protect the town. The bandits are narcos (which is all the scary rage right now), but aside from refusing to pay for their tacos it's hard to see what danger they might pose here, or what they might want from this moneyless backwater off the trafficking trail.

So forget the premise — what about that old "willing suspension of disbelief"? Yet so much demands it. There's no room for nuance here, only extremes: The Border Patrol agents are pretty much all brutal bastards, unless they have a heart of gold. Racist means skinhead with black boots. If you're gay in this book, you're a queen. All from central casting.

It is the gee-golly dialogue, though, that truly strains your will to believe. It shares with sitcoms a reliance on one-liners — and sometimes has its own built-in

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laugh track. Someone makes a joke and Urrea writes: "They slapped her high fives, always eager to reward her for saying something witty or pithy." At one point Nayeli, a parody of feminine determination, actually channels Yoda: "There is no trying. ... There is only doing." But perhaps the dialogue is not as embarrassing as the dialogue tags. In Urrea's world, people "enthus" things almost as often as they say them. The politics are not a strain here. They could have strained more. The message is almost always preachy and obvious. A Mexican radio announcer decries the invasion of illegal immigrants from Central America, and the irony is abundantly clear: "What do we do about the Guatemalans? Have you seen the Salvadourans? Por favor! Keep them out!" In Mazatlan, we learn about the distortions of NAFTA in vegetable stalls that sell overpriced beans grown nearby, exported to California and then sold back to Mexico. "That," one character enthuses, in case it escaped you, "is the stupidest thing anyone has ever said to me."

Urrea spent 20 years writing his previous novel, *The Hummingbird's Daughter*. This book seems rushed. How else to explain lines like this one: "They were utterly alone in the vastness of this ridiculously immense land?" Or: "He ascertained to his satisfaction that she wasn't begging for alms." *The Devil's Highway*, Urrea's nonfiction work about a catastrophic illegal border crossing, was a finalist for a Pulitzer; it is serious, even harrowing in parts. With this book, what once was a terrible rite of passage for slews of dirt-poor Mexicans has become quick, easily digestible — even cute — fare. This is Border Crossing Lite.



SUNDAY PROFILE



Above: Director Peter Strickland's film *Katalin Varga* was screened in competition at the 59th Berlinale Film Festival on February 11 in Berlin.
Above center and above right: Scenes from the Romanian-Hungarian movie *Katalin Varga*, which was made on a budget of about US\$40,000 by Peter Strickland.

PHOTOS: AP AND AFP

Despite all odds

First-time director Peter Strickland explains how he came to make a revenge movie in a language he didn't speak with little money and no experience

BY **RONALD BERGAN**
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Earlier this year, at the Berlin film festival, the starry directorial lineup included Theo Angelopoulos, Chen Kaige (陳凱歌), Lukas Moodysson, Costa-Gavras, Andrej Wajda and Peter Strickland. Peter Strickland? Who he? That is a question almost the entire film industry has been asking ever since.

Strickland's meteoric rise to prominence is nothing short of astonishing, and should hearten anyone toiling in obscurity. The plain facts are these. Strickland is 35, with an English father and Greek mother (both teachers), and was raised and educated in the English provincial town of Reading, west of London. "Oscar Wilde was thrown in prison there. That's all you need to know about Reading," he says. But how did Strickland come to leave "dull and flat" Reading for "exciting and mountainous" Transylvania to shoot a feature film in Hungarian, a language he didn't speak?

Katalin Varga, an eerily beautiful, rural revenge tragedy, is not the first film of Strickland's to be presented in a film festival. In 1997, he got his 15-minute short *Bubblegum* into Berlin. In order to make it, Strickland took what little savings he had and went to New York to track down Nick Zed, the underground filmmaker behind the Cinema of Transgression manifesto, and Holly Woodlawn, one of Andy Warhol's drag queens, to play "a crypto-Elvisian rockably" and his ageing fan respectively. Five years later, after a series of soul-destroying jobs and trying to find a producer interested in his scripts, he decided to spend an inheritance from his uncle to escape from England and make a feature film.

"I was relatively wealthy for the first time in my life and realized that this might be my only chance to make a feature," Strickland says, sitting in a modest

apartment in Budapest where he now lives with his Hungarian girlfriend. "Almost everyone said I was insane, suicidal, deluded, etc, and that it's impossible to make a film for less than US\$330,000 even in Romania. I had barely a third of that. There were many times when I seriously doubted what I was doing. I often thought of just buying a flat, as almost everyone advised. But I asked myself, 'Should I buy myself a one-bedroom flat in Bracknell (near Reading) or should I make a revenge film in Transylvania?' I think the main thing that kept me going was knowing that if I bought a flat, I would always wonder, 'What if?' Even if I failed, I would know I tried my very best."

Katalin Varga is set in the Hungarian-speaking part of Romania. Strickland only had a smattering of Hungarian, and directed the film in English. "Even though I got to know the Hungarian translation quite well, I felt very helpless if the actors wanted to improvise certain parts. For me, this film represents a movie Transylvania — but not in the Dracula sense. Everything is heightened — the goat bells, crickets, wind ... It's a conglomeration of what I felt as an outsider. To help the certain intense atmosphere I wanted to capture, I listened to *Pornography* by The Cure and *Suicide* by Suicide on headphones endlessly during the writing process. I also watched Charles Laughton's *Night of the Hunter* and Paradjanov's *Shadows of Our Forgotten Ancestors* again and again. All the ingredients for the film were in these and the Popol Vuh soundtrack to Herzog's *Nosferatu*.

"The shoot was difficult, but not as bad as expected. We had a very short and intense period of many people living together in one house with no beds, only sleeping bags, and one bathroom in a small village in the Carpathian mountains. There was just one grocery store and a small bar.

"The period up until the end of shooting was very romantic and exhilarating for all of us. There was a strong feeling of 'us against them' because we were outside the film industry fighting to do something on our own terms. We really wanted to work within the industry, but we never got that chance. Now I'm glad it worked out that way. Whatever happens to me or the film, nobody can tarnish those memories. I just can't imagine how the shoot would have been if we turned up in trucks and taxis with line producers from Soho bringing their supplies of sushi and pomegranate juice." The film was made completely independently for around US\$40,000 with a very small crew of 11 people including transport and catering. Strickland paid everyone on the shoot out of his own pocket, apart from the focus-puller, who agreed to work for free.

"That was the best time. But what is usually ignored by newspaper articles on the making of films is the paralyzing fear when you get home and wait and wait for something to happen. Filmmaking isn't difficult: it's the waiting and fear of failure that is." It was during post-production that the rot set in. Strickland's inheritance money was quickly drying up. He had to put the film on hold for eight months and go back to Reading to find a job. "If I'd known it would be only eight months, I would have coped, but I assumed it was the end. People ask me how I survived shooting in the Carpathian mountains. What they should really ask me is how I survived living in Reading afterwards. I was out of money and luck. I had made a feature film but couldn't afford to edit it. It was a terrible period of depression and frustration."

Strickland approached many production companies and the reaction

was always negative. An obscure film by an unknown director, not made in English, seemed to put off UK investors. "With digital technology, everyone has a film in their pocket. How are you going to convince producers to spend an hour watching what you've shot when hundreds of others are doing the same? I'm not trying to put people off making films, but when you see how many hundreds of people are hustling at festivals and elsewhere just to have their work looked at, it's quite daunting. I was very naive, thinking that if I sent a rough DVD copy to festivals, it would be accepted. My God, was I wrong!"

Strickland returned to Budapest and got a job teaching English, which he is still doing. "I've always had to balance projects with normal jobs to survive, but it's very difficult to find the mental energy to write when you get home from work. During the darkest days of post-production, I craved a producer to take the weight off my shoulders." In the meanwhile, he was approaching as many people as possible — until finally two Romanian producers, Oana and Tudor Giurgiu, paid attention. They saw the rough cut and came on board as co-producers, providing the funds to make a proper sound mix and blow-up from the Super 16mm negatives. It was then snapped up by the Berlin film festival and a French distributor. The lesson is that without a producer, the film would never have been properly finished, nor exist in the public domain.

"The biggest irony about recent events is that I haven't changed, but I'm viewed more sympathetically by certain people, whereas a year ago, I was essentially seen as a leech. 'Oh God, it's that kid from Reading always hassling me to see his film.'"

Katalin Varga goes on general release later this year.

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How to lose friends and alienate people

Nancy Tucker's 'Strait Talk' is an incisive analysis of the history of US-Taiwan relations that ends with a rosy assessment of President Ma's China policy

BY **GERRIT VAN DER WEES**
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Strait Talk is an excellent book, particularly for those who want to understand the turbulent triangular relationship between the US, Taiwan and China, and how it has been influenced by various people over the past six decades. The author is Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, who is professor in the history department and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, and a diplomatic historian who specializes in US-East Asian relations. In this book, published in February, she covers events and policy debates from the days of the Truman presidency all the way through the end of the Bush administration in 2008.

Tucker provides an incredible amount of research — drawing from both interviews and archives — and the result is a highly readable account of the intricacies of US policy towards Taiwan, as it moved from recognition of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime in Taipei to "informal" relations with "the people of Taiwan" after the Carter administration switched official diplomatic recognition of China

from the KMT's Republic of China (ROC) to Beijing's People's Republic of China (PRC).

An important contribution of the book is that it shows how politicians and diplomats from former US presidents Harry Truman to George W. Bush shaped policies, and how US policy toward China and Taiwan varied significantly, depending on the background, knowledge and political insights of the people involved. Tucker is most unsparing in her criticism of former US president Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger.

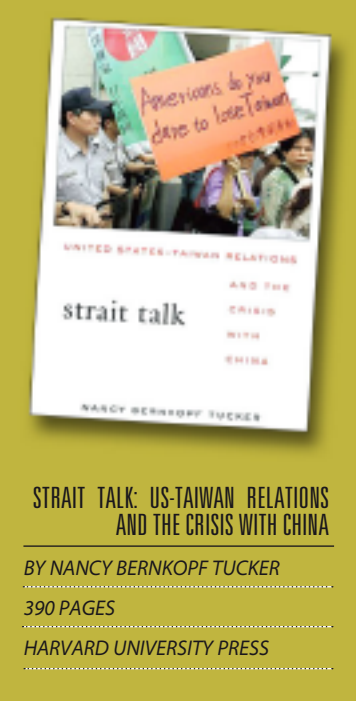
"Nixon and Kissinger viewed Taiwan as expendable, as less valuable than the strategic and political advantages that a new relationship with the PRC would secure. As a result, they decided to give Beijing what it wanted in order to make a deal. In the process, they misled China's rulers into believing that the US would step aside and allow Taiwan to collapse. When that did not happen, Beijing, like Taipei, felt betrayed."

In their eagerness to play the China card, Nixon and Kissinger undermined the effectiveness and durability of their initiative.

They underestimated support for Taiwan and ignored Taiwan's capacity for meaningful political reform, which would provide the wherewithal for survival. Their shortsightedness, virtually guaranteed by excessive secrecy, bred mistrust everywhere. This collateral damage to US integrity, diplomacy, and democracy, at home and abroad, constitutes the most serious indictment of the policies pursued."

Tucker's research also shows that all through the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, there was widespread support for "dual representation" in the UN, both inside successive US administrations as well as among governments of other countries, including the UK and the USSR. Tucker cites the 1959 Conlon Report, written by political scientist Robert Scalapino, which called for diplomatic relations with Beijing, but also for recognizing the ROC as the Republic of Taiwan. She describes how in the 1970s then-UN ambassador George H.W. Bush fought tenaciously for such an outcome. Interestingly, the USSR also expressed support — albeit briefly — for Taiwan's independence in early 1973. However, all these efforts ran into

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one major roadblock: Chiang Kai-shek's (蔣介石) stubborn refusal to compromise on representation by the PRC in the UN, which was eventually the main reason for Taiwan's increasing

international isolation.

Tucker also describes vividly how, in the run-up to normalization of relations with China, US officials tended to make policy towards Taiwan without adequate thought or planning, and without consulting or giving any warning to Taipei. The decision to normalize relations with the PRC in December 1978 was reached in total secrecy — even Congress was left out. This pattern would repeat itself over subsequent decades: Former US president Bill Clinton embraced the "Three Noes" (no to Taiwan's independence, no to "two Chinas" and no to Taiwan's membership in international organizations requiring statehood) in 1998, and in December 2003, Bush — standing next to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (溫家寶) — criticized former president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and told him that the US interpreted as a "change of the status quo" and thus opposed a planned referendum that asked China to publicly renounce the use of force against Taiwan and withdraw missiles aimed at the country.

Tucker leads readers through fascinating chapters on the shaping of the Taiwan Relations Act and Taiwan's subsequent

transition to democracy, the 1996 missile crisis and the shift in Clinton's position that followed in 1997 and 1998 and which eventually resulted in his trip to China and pronouncement of the "Three Noes."

A main theme of Tucker's book is that Taiwan's democratization is a "new" element in the equation. It has strengthened the rationale of supporting Taiwan's independence. At the same time, to many of those involved in the Nixon/Kissinger effort of normalizing relations with China, it is also perceived as adding "unwelcome volatility in the cross-strait situation," in the words of Chas Freeman, former US ambassador to Saudi Arabia and a founding member of the US-China Policy Foundation.

Another theme is that the lack of adequate communication between the US and Taiwan has led to misunderstandings and distrust. In her conclusion, Tucker pleads for "diplomacy at higher, more authoritative levels" to break down existing barriers between the two countries — such as the present insistence of the US administration that no officials above the rank of Deputy Assistant Secretary meet Taiwanese

counterparts — that have led to confusion and misapprehension regarding each country's position. She argues that "American national interests, defined as much by values as by security or strategic goals, render sacrifice of Taiwan unacceptable. The US must do more than merely confront and be party to a Strait impasse. For itself and for Taiwan and China, the US has a political and moral obligation to contribute to a solution."

Overall, Tucker's book makes an excellent contribution to better knowledge and understanding of US policy towards Taiwan. The only area where I disagree with Tucker's analysis is in her assessment of President Ma Ying-jeou's (馬英九) new administration. Both in the beginning and at the end of the book, the author presents an all-too-rosy picture — which she calls "the politics of hope" — of Ma's rapprochement with China, underestimating the problems this might pose for America's political, economic and security interests in East Asia, as well as the increase of political tension it generates within Taiwan.

Gerrit van der Wees is the editor of 'Taiwan Communiqué.'