

Sanchez, M.G. (2015). *Jonathan Gallardo*. Huntingdon: Rock Scorpion Books, pp. 334

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Jonathan Gallardo is the third novel in M.G. Sanchez' literary production and, as the title easily suggests, it is a coming-of-age story, a *Bildungsroman* centred on a Gibraltarian protagonist going through a variety of experiences, including the irruption and the haunt of the paranormal. However, the author himself, in a personal communication we had some months ago, seems to offer another possible interpretive key to this and the rest of his long fiction by speaking about a speculation on and an exploration of the idea of movement, both physical and emotional, between spaces, times and dimensions. In this light, in fact, *The Escape Artist* (2013) concerns a kind of shifting between the UK and the Rock; *Solitude House* (2015) envisages a pendulum-like movement between Gibraltar and mainland Spain, whilst *Jonathan Gallardo* detects a sense of wandering within and across the colony, from the upper-class district around Main Street to the working areas perched on the Rock, as well as the human mind, perception and understanding.

Constructed as a biographical account of a young Gibraltarian man, the narrative makes use of the present tense to provide vividness and realistic effects, although some Dickensian echoes linger within the textual interstices: "his name is Jonathan Gallardo and he is an orphan. He is about six foot one, gaunt-faced but with big muscular hands, flat-stomached but with a naturally strong jawline, the type that boxing fans refer to as a natural cruiserweight" (1). But another achievement of the present-tense articulation of the story lies in the implied sense of actuality and inevitability that it strives to convey, almost turning a fictional story into a kind of objective chronicle, with reference to historical facts too: "time passes. The border has now been open for almost three years" (147).

The novel essentially follows a miserable, introspective character from his birth in the 1970s to the present, in his attempts to cope with a range of difficult experiences: the initial years at the Bishop Audley Home for Orphaned Boys, the time spent and the bullying at Gibraltar Technical College, the menial job as a street cleaner for the Public Works Department, and a poor social life. However, a curious, uncanny episode marks Jonathan's existence and throws him into a zone of liminality: during his stay

at the catholic orphanage, he “begins to hear a ringing buzz in his ears” (23), firstly near a statute of Mary and then, as he grows older, in various parts of the colony. Initially it is a kind of low hum, but then it becomes very annoying, overwhelming, and unbearable, and no doctor seems to find a cure for such a pain, which eventually worsens and even acquires a new modulation: a faint, distant voice, an echo of someone speaking in Spanish. Jonathan is at the edge of madness as he understands that the voices and messages that he hears come from the past and they ghostly portray a seedy context that does not exist any longer. To tackle his curse, he even contacts Mama Maria, “the best tarot card reader and *spiritista* on the Rock” (90), who however does not seem to be able to help him. When his uncontrolled fits threaten to destroy his entire life, the boy looks for some relief from the psychiatric unit of King George V Hospital: thanks to the treatment and drugs he receives, he is now feeling better, but life will turn out to be even more complicated, with several other ramifications of the plot. Incidentally, the use of antidepressants and anxiolytic medications is not a new element in Sanchez’s fiction (e.g. in his short stories) and it may allude to an attempt to sedate the inner chaotic thought and consciousness of a colonial territory that tries to come to terms with its instability, disorder and identity. In other words, madness provocatively surfaces as a metaphor for the condition of (post)coloniality in the contemporary epoch.

In my opinion, at least two ways can be proposed to approach this novel considering that on the one hand, it takes up the form of a dark fairy tale, with many elements borrowed from the gothic tradition or from a contemporary drama, whilst on the other it serves as an alternative canvas for the representation of the present and past histories of Gibraltar, thus unearthing hidden voices, anecdotes, and heritage. There are also other interesting stylistic characteristics in the book, in particular from a narrative perspective, such as the overabundance of sensory verbs like ‘hear, see, seem’ that are used to stage Jonathan’s emotional maelstrom or the predominance of narration rather than speech to convey the idea of inner turmoil through an external focalisation. The playful but functional mechanism of code switching between English and Spanish too is notable and anchors the story to a specific location and context: “they always start off in English, but, this being Gibraltar, after a few minutes official policy is forgotten and Spanish rapidly becomes the main language of communication” (19).

Let me now return to the two interpretive keys mentioned above. The fantastic, eerie aura of the novel is mainly represented by the cacophony of voices that buzz inside Jonathan’s head and that progressively become audible “in all types of places: tunnels, down alleyways, halfway up staircases, outside shops, inside offices, even in public toilet” (83). Yet it also emerges in other apparently superficial details: first of all, the evocative places that dot Jonathan’s life. About the old orphanage for example, we

read that it “was originally built as a lazaretto for sick troops” (4) and with its heavy religious atmosphere, it still communicates a feeling of uneasiness, riving the decadent and corrupt Mediterranean atmosphere suggested by a certain gothic imagination. Other touches of mystery derive from the clairvoyant, the dreams and nightmares that continuously upset the protagonist and the looming reverberation of death and casualties. However, the novel – and this probably is its real force – also permits to examine the complex and multifarious condition of Gibraltar, and its many questions such as the necessarily double relationships with the UK and Spain, the somewhat threatening presence of the border, the sense of displacement that takes its toll on the population, and the blurred identity of a colony that seems not to be able to find its place in history, especially now as we head towards the uncertain Brexit age. In this light, the manifestation of the supernatural is instrumental in exploring discourses of language, power and society, acknowledging the numerous components that left a sign in Gibraltar, such as the Genoese and Maltese communities, the British military use of the Rock, but also the many forms of discrimination, racism and prejudice against the Gibraltarians themselves, often depicted as a crowd of ignorant, illiterate and ‘inferior’ subjects. To corroborate this journey through memory, the narration juxtaposes present and past, whereas the protagonist develops an interest in historical research and often consults documents and materials available from the library. In discovering events from the past, he also understands other aspects of his Gibraltar (for example, how the inheritance of the past is mirrored in the various place-names of his world), and to some extent of his own sense of the self: “what bothers him above everything else is how many of the demons of that long-gone colonial past are still encroaching their way into the present” (146). It is not easy to delineate the experience of those countries that have gone through or somehow are still affected by the condition of colonialism, but Sanchez offers a critical reflection on the theme by considering the complexities of a micro-territory that symbolically and geographically links and divides nations, seas, visions and populations.

