7 Ways to Kill a Cat by Matías Néspolo trans. Frank Wynne

Recommended by English PEN’s Writers in Translation programme

‘Gringo and Chueco as main characters showed a contrast in attitude but also proved
the extent of “peer pressure” applied to join the Gangs.

The thread of the novel “Moby Dick” running through the story was a rather strange
analogy but gave the opportunity to show another side of Gringo and also led into the
meeting of other characters to bring in Gringo’s past (his mother being sold into
prostitution etc) thus showing how it is often the Women and Children who suffer the
most from this kind of lifestyle as demonstrated) by the characters Mamina, Quique and
Cecilia.

This novel was not one I would have chosen to read, but it has some relevance to our
modern social history as gangs and violence are spreading through urban society
throughout the civilised world. It also shows how poverty and unemployment has a
profound effect on young people and forces them into this culture, but there will always
be a balance El Jetita (violent gang leader) Chueco (blindly following the majority mostly
through fear) Gringo (longing for a different culture but not knowing the way out). The
demonstration is the climax and hopefully will show Gringo a different way.’

AS, Bishops Hull House Book Club, Taunton

‘I’m afraid no one in our book group liked this book at all! That is quite a rarity. Some of
the group only managed a few chapters because they found the subject matter and the
dialogue distasteful. It was difficult to empathise with any of the characters or the way of
life. We did feel that the gang life was the alternative family. The story content didn’t make you want to find out what happened to the characters - perhaps something was lost in the translation. I don’t think we are the target market. However, some of us felt that we should read books of this genre to try and understand how poverty can easily lead to a life of crime. Unfortunately we didn’t think Matias Nespolo was the new Charles Dickens.’

Eileen Brooks, Borrough Browsers, Leicestershire

‘This is not a book I would have normally picked up, but enjoyed the read. An interesting and violent start (especially for a cat lover!), but you are quickly drawn in to a fast moving story about the reality and hardships of life and how people deal with it in different ways. I liked the translation of this version to English which left some key words, sayings and character names in their original language. I think that really helps the reader build their picture of life in the barrio.’

SA, Bishops Hull House Book Club Taunton

‘The book is written in a sharp, pacy style that reflected the staccato of violence in the barrio. Initially, I struggled with the language and the violence which made me feel uncomfortable but five chapters in I began to feel the vulnerability of Gringo – his need for his grandmother’s approval, the quest to renew his friendship with Toni and his protective friendships. I also became hooked by his growing interest in women and his blossoming as a young man. The latter end of the story, when he was being hunted down, made my heart race and his final acceptance of his fate was tear jerking. However, I failed to make connection with the Moby Dick. In short, I found myself enjoying a story that I was sure I wouldn’t.’

FP, Bishops Hull House Book Club Taunton

‘7 Ways to Kill a Cat is set in a world where police are non-existent and power equals corruption. Violence runs throughout in an Argentina that’s economy has crashed so people strike, steal, fight and kill to survive.

The story is relayed through the eyes of Gringo, a young man, who is fighting for survival in an extremely poor environment. Empathy is felt for Gringo because of his emotional relationships with the other slum dwellers; he loves and looks after Mamina who raised him in the absence of his mother and stands by Chueco a ‘friend’ who is self-absorbed and obsessed with money, drugs and guns.

Nespolo writes well and through the slum dwellers he portrays the stark realities of life Argentina. He uses street slang language to take the reader into the slums of Buenos Aires giving the feeling that you are intricately intertwined in the lives of the characters.

The book is a great read which is enhanced with the Spanish slang riddled throughout the text keeping the experience authentic. If you wish to immerse yourself in a young Argentineans’ life, in the 1950’s, of poverty, hardships and emotional relationships this is the book for you!’

AS, Bishops Hull House Book Club Taunton
'Our book group was lucky enough to win a set of *7 Ways to Kill a Cat* through the “Reading Groups for Everyone” website. As co-ordinator of the group I thought it sounded an interesting read, however after some members said they were finding it difficult and commenting on the over use of the “f” word I started with some trepidation! Once I began to read the book myself I forgot about these concerns as I quickly became involved in the story of Gringo and his best friend Chueco amidst the gangs of the “barrio”. The book is written in a series of short, sharp chapters, almost as “scenes” from Gringo’s life, and as it unfolds you realise, along with Gringo, that what he always believed to be the truth is not. His relationship with Chueco is tested when it dawns on him that Chueco has been working for the local gang leader El Jetita and, by playing on their friendship, has got him involved too, so when he gets a means to escape the “barrio” and the hope of a better life you want to read to the end of the book to see if he succeeds.’

**EY, Bishops Hull House Book Club Taunton**

'I found this book a tense and emotional story of a young man’s life in the slums of Buenos Aires. Gringo is an honest and well-meaning young man who is drawn into criminality and drug warfare against his will. It is written in a way that brings the characters to life and makes you care about what happens to them. As the violence intensifies, his girlfriend and his friend’s girlfriend are drawn into prostitution, and then his friend is killed. The only hope of stopping the violence, saving his girlfriend, and finding a life beyond drug dealing, is through Tony, who seems a powerful and charismatic character. However Gringo has to kill Tony, as he finds out that Tony seduced Gringo’s mother into prostitution and brought about her death. At the end, he feels as if he is already dead, and one can imagine that he has little chance of a long life.

One of the other key characters is Mamina, who seems to bring up a succession of young men, on slender means, trying to guide them into an honest life, but never succeeding. She is obviously a strong and hard-working woman, who manages to keep going by helping others and providing an example of normal life.’

**Harriet, Winterbourne Library Reading Group, Winterbourne Library**

‘A really cleverly written novel. To read it is a shocking, edgy and breathless ride. It bares its teeth in a snarling, uncomfortable, yet sympathetic description of life in the barrio. The two ways to kill a cat are either a) savage or b) civilised and the balance between these two concepts is what spirits this novel along. Gringo and his struggle for survival and the comfort and puzzlement he finds with the story of Moby Dick is a juxtaposition that jars and focuses the reader. What separates this from a ‘bang bang
you’re dead’ novel is the appalling inevitability of the life. It was difficult to warm to any of the characters apart from Mamina, Quique and Yanian and the brevity of the book meant that characters were little more than thumbnail sketches. The translator must have done a good job. It was sad that the brief glimpses of human relationships attempting to blossom were eclipsed by the reality of life on the streets and sad to know that this is being played out in a thousand cities around the world. This is a novel that lingers in your thoughts and certainly bears closer examination in its metaphor and symbolism.

We would you recommend this book to others as it is relevant even in our city – much discussion in our meeting about trafficked sex trade women. It is a novel that has many layers.’

**Anon, Immaculate Conception Book Group, Southampton**

‘The novel is set in the barrios of Buenos Aires during the Argentinean financial collapse of 2001 and which sparked violent protests and widespread civic unrest.

The story is told from the perspective of Gringo a petty criminal. He opens the story with a graphic description of skinning and butchering a cat for its meat. When he beats up a local bar owner with his accomplice Chueco, he gets drawn into the sinister underworld of the local drug baron, El Jetita. The boys' intimidation of some low-ranking drug-dealers leads to a bloody and violent escalation which leads to the death of Chueco in a shoot-out.

His surrogate mother, Mamina provides a solitary, stable and dependable relationship in his life. Mamina has disowned his hero and mentor, Toni for pimping Chueco’s mother who subsequently died and Gringo shoots Toni when he attempts to arbitrate during a final showdown between the two drug-gangs.

This is a Darwinian world marked by an absence of the state (apart from corrupt officials) or any notion of a civic society. Relationships are transient, fickle and deceitful and the characters seem controlled by their unrestrained impulses for sex, food, drugs or violence. Life is lived in the present with little room for reflection – Gringo did once have aspirations to build a future outside the barrio and set up an ethic crafts business with Toni.

The novel captures the claustrophobia of the barrio and the near impossibility of escape from the orbit of its criminal class. Gringo’s attempts at getting beyond this narrow world that he can glimpse seem doomed – he even struggles to connect with fictional worlds such as the Melville’s Moby Dick which he attempts to read.

This is a undoubtedly a great read for those who relish fast-paced, bleak and chilling tales of hopeless and brutalised lives.’

**Anon, Hurst Lane Reading Group, Bollington**