

Sinister Tales Evoke Compassion

Margit J. Smith

Oct 10, 1976

THE DECAPITATED CHICKEN AND OTHER STORIES, by Horacio Quiroga. Selected and translated by Margaret Sayers Peden. Introduction by George D. Schade. University of Texas Press, \$8.95.

A master craftsman of the short story is introduced to us in this first collection of South American storyteller Horacio Quiroga's haunting tales to be published in English.

Quiroga, whose own life was violent and tragic and ended in suicide, presents the jungle of Northern Argentina with snake-infested waters, merciless heat, with death threatening constantly and life reduced to its most elemental state by hatred, revenge, love tenderness and cruelty.

Some of the stories are strangely disturbing, sinister tales of horror and Gothic fiction, such as "The Feather Pillow," "The Pursued" and "Juan Darien" presage Freudian themes "The Son" evokes compassion and pity, and "The Decapitated Chicken" must be one of the most cruel and psychologically twisted stories ever contained in 12 pages. Stark and somber and fantastic these stories are; they are hewn with expertise and the precise knowledge of the master story teller Quiroga acknowledged Poe as his master, and like Poe. set down rules for writing short stories.

Not a word is wasted - in "Drifting" the first three lines contain the essence of all that comes afterward; inescapable, cruel, painful death. While the jungle pulsates with life, the dying man cannot accept his fate in these familiar, everyday surroundings. "Anaconda", the sinuous, glittering, death-dealing world of vipers and snakes, pits man against animal, and it is man who wins the immediate battle.

The larger part of Quiroga's stories is a narrative form: dialogue is used sparingly and with precision when it is needed at all. His perception of moods, and his ability to evoke settings with a minimum of words, are especially evident in "The Dead Man," "A Slap in the Face," in which a wronged man wreaks his vengeance, and in "Sunstroke." Social commentary, psychological insight, emotional intensity, heartfelt suffering, and profound despair, are all there for us to experience through these superb tales.

It is hoped that more material by Quiroga will be translated and that we will have a chance to become more familiar with this fascinating writer. Although it is at first thought difficult to imagine that Quiroga also wrote a children's book: *Jungle Tales*, there is no reason why so gifted an author should not be able to turn his pen successfully in that direction.

I, for one, will certainly try to obtain and read as much of Horacio Quiroga's oeuvre as I can.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Mrs. Smith is a graduate Student in Library Science at Texas Woman's University.)

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The Ted K Archive

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