

Showdown in the Andes

THE POTBELLIED VIRGIN, fiction by Alicia Yáñez Cossío. University of Texas Press, 2006. Paperback, \$19.95.

Why read a book about small town struggle in Ecuador? Well, for one thing, *The Potbellied Virgin* (*La Virgin Pipona*) by Alicia Yáñez Cossío contains brilliant writing, savage wit and overwhelming imagery. For another, UO

Spanish professor Amalia Gladhart translated the work, a task that must have been as rewarding as it was challenging.

For years, Latin America suffered under a structure in which wealthy landowners, the military and the Catholic Church conspired to oppress Native peoples and workers. That's one reason liberation theology took firm root in Latin America; that's the

reason Latin Americans produced leftist leaders who scared the U.S. into toppling, or trying to topple, sovereign governments. It's nice to know some of this background in order to get the levels of commentary and metaphor in *The Potbellied Virgin*, but the writing provides rewards of its own.

The book begins with an image of a young woman riding hard through the town, her long blond hair representing both her lineage and her desire for freedom from her oppressive relatives. Four men, the old Pandos, sit smok-

ing in the square, hoping to discover where the ruling Benavides clan and their Sisterhood of the Bead on the Gown of the Potbellied Virgin have hidden deeds showing the Pandos' right to the land. There's mordant humor in images like the sacristan selling and reselling the same altar candles, the mattress skirmish and the never-ending military parade. There's weary acknowledgement in the description of human interactions. And there's the baroque, enfolded writing. A complex mix of history, resignation, rebellion and irony, the writing showcases the genius both of Yáñez Cossío's original and of Gladhart's stunning translation. By the end, there's some small hope for the future, hope that will come not from fading documents but from the actions of the oppressed. **EW**

Amalia Gladhart reads at 4 pm Sunday, Aug. 13 at Tsunami Books.

Flights and Paths

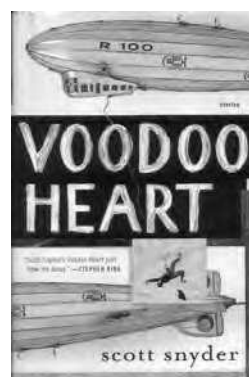
VOODOO HEART, stories by Scott Snyder. Dial Press, 2006. Hardcover, \$24.

With evocative descriptions and a palpable sense of uncertainty, Scott Snyder's first collection of short stories, *Voodoo Heart*, works a sort of magic. Snyder's characters are oddballs: One is chasing a blimp across the country, certain his fiancée is aboard. Another guards a Dumpster with a speargun. A third escapes his wealthy family for a life on the run. The reality inhabited by these characters is perhaps bound a little less tightly to natural laws than ours.

Snyder steps toward but never quite crosses into the more enchanted worlds of Aimee Bender and Kelly Link; his tales are more grounded, less metaphorical but still entrancing. They're often concerned with flying, following maps, watching others or simply noticing what's outside one's immediate sphere. In "Wreck," a treasure-hunting loner observes children at a weight loss camp, fascinated by the way they seem to leave part of themselves behind when they leave at the end of summer. The title story finds a young couple in a sprawling house in Florida, a "camp" for female criminals just a telescope-assisted glance away. Jacob, who's afraid of the moment he knows is coming, the point at which he drives away his beloved Laura, watches the incarcerated women to the point of distraction.

Jacob is not the only character whose fate is uncertain at the end of his tale, but the ambiguity is done with precision; there are no easy outs in Snyder's dusty Midwest or damp Florida (his stories span the country as well as the skies). Endings are endings; people leave, people change, and all is captured in lovely prose that reveals just as much as it should. "She smiled, but there was something very sad tucked into the corners of her mouth," thinks the narrator of "Dumpster Tuesday." There's something likewise very sad tucked into the stories in *Voodoo Heart*, but it's tucked there with such grace, the sadness feels warmly familiar, like a favorite melancholy song you lose yourself in on a bad day. — Molly Templeton

Scott Snyder reads at 7:30 pm Tuesday, Aug. 15 at Powell's on Burnside, Portland.



BOOK NOTES: Poets **Michael McGriff** (*Choke*) & **George Hitchcock** read, 7:30 pm 8/10, Tsunami Books. **Jana McBurney-Lin** reads from *My Half of the Sky*, 4:30 pm 8/12, Books Without Borders. **All Oregon Slam** featuring the Eugene, Corvallis & Bend Slam Teams, 8 pm 8/12, World Café. \$5. Poet **JoAn Osborne** and **Jana McBurney-Lin** read, 2pm 8/13, Mother Kali's. Translator **Amalia Gladhart** reads from *The Potbellied Virgin*, 4 pm 8/13, Tsunami Books. Haiku Showdown and victory performance by the All Oregon Slam winner, 9 pm 8/13, Sam Bond's Garage. 21+. \$5. **Scott Snyder** reads, 7:30 pm 8/15, Powell's on Burnside, Portland.

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