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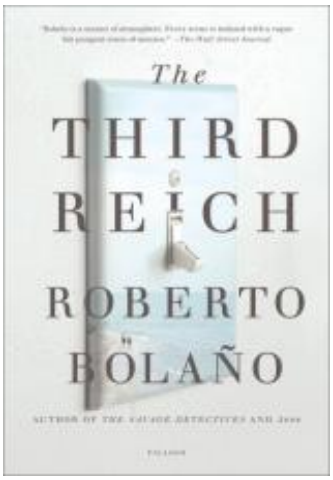
The Third Reich

by Roberto Bolano



About the Book

Reinterpreting the legacy of the Latin American literary boom, Roberto Bolaño?s prizewinning fiction balances hilarity with provocative explorations of the human psyche. His most substantial works have only recently become available in English; his epic novel 2666 won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2008, five years after the author?s death at age fifty.

The Third Reich showcases an early achievement by this stunningly gifted writer. Written in 1989 and found among Bolaño?s papers after his death, this is the story of a German war-games champion named Udo who meets his match while vacationing on Spain?s Costa Brava. Returning to the Hotel Del Mar, where he spent the summers of his childhood, Udo is accompanied by his beloved Ingeborg. It?s the couple?s first holiday together, but his greater obsession is Third Reich, his favorite World War II strategy game. At a bar one night, Udo is introduced to a severely disfigured local known as El Quemado, who later becomes his Third Reich opponent. But El Quemado seems to think that the game is a very real projection of his life --- and a means to push Udo to the brink of insanity. When Charly, another German vacationer, vanishes without a trace, Udo suspects that El Quemado is involved. Ingeborg eventually returns to Germany alone while Udo extends his stay; he?s drawn to the Del Mar?s beautiful proprietor, Frau Else, whose dying husband may hold the key to El Quemado?s mysterious quest. As the Allies close in on Udo, he realizes that he?s poised to lose much more than a game.

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Roberto Bolaño?s **The Third Reich**. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this literary treasure.

Discussion Guide

1. What skills make Udo a highly successful gamer? Do these techniques enhance or hinder him in his career and relationships?

2. As Udo tells his story, how does his perception of himself change? How might the story have unfolded if it had been told from El Quemado?s point of view instead?

3. If you were Ingeborg, would you have been sympathetic to Udo? Do they make a good couple? What are the differences between Udo?s attraction for Ingeborg and his desire for Frau Else?

4. What role do the Wolf and the Lamb play in stoking Udo?s imagination? What do they get from associating with Udo, and vice versa? What common objectives do the three men share?

5. Is Charly and Hanna?s volatile relationship more stable than Udo and Ingeborg?s? What were your theories about Charly?s disappearance?

6. Is Frau Else being shrewd, coy, or just indecisive with Udo? Is he a worthy adversary for her husband?

7. Despite her low status, how does Clarita exert influence over men? Does she bring clarity (true to her name) to Udo?s predicament?

8. What does Udo learn from El Quemado about the power of memory and the experience of being a victim? How is El Quemado able to outmaneuver Udo even though he is new to playing Third Reich?

9. What makes World War II a powerful metaphor for the lives of the characters, as the German Udo vacations in a country once ruled by Franco? What does it mean to Udo to revisit historic military campaigns from this particular war? What makes him more obsessed with Third Reich than with other games?

10. Why does Frau Else?s husband try to protect Udo from El Quemado? What is his motivation for getting involved in the game? On some level, are his predictions about Nuremberg?s consequences (?The trial may be the most important part of the game?) proven to be true?

11. What do Udo?s dreams say about his deepest fears? How is he affected by his childhood memories of Costa Brava?

12. Udo insists that Third Reich is all about strategy, not about the morality of real-life warriors. Is he being honest about himself when he makes these claims? Ultimately, why is Udo doomed in his contest against El Quemado?

13. How did Udo?s final scene with El Quemado compare to your own ideas about the looming danger?

14. In the aftermath scene titled ?Seeckt,? Conrad is told that his circle is like ?a ghostly General Staff, forever performing military exercises on game boards . . . shadows playing with shadows.? How are the other characters affected by the ghosts of the sojourn in Costa Brava?

15. The Third Reich was written in 1989. How can we apply it to twenty-first-century power struggles around the world, and to the virtual battlefields of online gaming? What message does Udo have for us today?

Author Bio

Roberto Bolaño was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1953. He grew up in Chile and Mexico City, where he was a founder of the Infrarealist poetry movement. His first full-length novel, THE SAVAGE DETECTIVES, received the Herralde Prize and the Rómulo Gallegos Prize when it appeared in 1998. Roberto Bolaño died in Blanes, Spain, at the age of 50.

Critical Praise

"The most influential and admired novelist of his generation."

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