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Roberto Bolano's By Night in Chile

By Night in Chile. Roberto Bolano. Translated by Chris Andrews. New Directions. 2003. 130 pages. A challenging book to read when you are busy and can only read ten to twenty pages a night. But worth it. One long paragraph in the mind of a dying priest who is looking back on his life, not confessing, instead justifying his way of living. Very long spiraling sentences. He's agitated by a "wizened youth" who I keep expecting to turn up in the text, but he never does, just a fly buzzing around the priest. A dying priest who writes poetry and criticism and enjoys the benefits of Chilean literary society under Pinochet. He makes the sign of the cross and at the same time ignores what is going on around him. He secretly teaches Pinochet and his military leaders about Marxism, knowing they are going to use this knowledge to oppress leftists. His compassion for the poor is just a ritual. Mostly he is disgusted by them. But he sometimes says he admires Neruda (but not for his politics for a poetic phrase or stance) and a critic he calls Farewell, another compromised human being who advocates high culture writing and socializing. In the tunnels in the basement of all this high thinking and elitism, there is a secret. We come to realize that the wizened youth knows this secret and he's been tormenting the priest with his knowledge and writings. As the priest tunnels down through his memories, never really looking deeply into the rooms around him (but the reader gets the idea that something isn't right in all of his rooms) and finally under the house where the literati meet there is a room with a naked man, tied up and suffering from torture. Religion, high culture and the military join hands to oppress, murder and destroy.

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