

**AN OASIS OF HORROR
IN A DESERT OF BOREDOM**

Roberto Bolaño's 2666

Jonathan Russell Clark



FICTION ADVOCATE

New York • San Francisco • Providence

A Fiction Advocate Book

An Oasis of Horror in a Desert of Boredom:

Roberto Bolaño's *2666*

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For my mother and my sister, and for Jess.

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PROLOGUE

The Part About Me Reading 2666 by Roberto Bolaño on New York City's Subways and Having a Funny Feeling About Life as I Knew It

People in New York sleep on the subways. Not only the down-and-out and destitute, for whom the shiny, McDonald's-playground-colored benches offer brief respite from the elements—no, very ordinary people in New York catch some shuteye as a matter of routine, barreling on tubular machines through tunnels below the ground. They're not merely taking the trains; they're living there, too.

I began to notice this in the winter of 2008, when I was staying in Brooklyn with an old friend of mine. As a visitor to the city, traversing the disparate geographies of friends and events, I spent more time *getting to* than *being at*. Privately, this pleased me. I love taking the subway. Not in some touristy way, to marvel at the

wonder of it all (I lived in Boston and rode trains all the time), but for the comfort. I read on the subway. The subway is probably my favorite place to read in the world. The gentle movement of the car subdues my anxiety (which is constant) and the clack-clack of its clamorous progress manages to overpower even the most vocal passengers. During particularly busy times, I have devoured entire books while riding the train—it was the only time I had.

So in New York, where it's bigger and more intimidating and my anxiety's fucking crazy, the subway offers a nice reprieve, a few minutes—between glances at approaching stations and bumps from standing passengers—to disappear within the madness. In 2008 I was reading Roberto Bolaño's massive novel *2666*, and I had reached Part 4, "The Part About the Crimes." The first three sections had a plot and some kind of narrative momentum, even if I wasn't sure how they connected. But Part 4 seemed like nothing more than an endless series of descriptions of murdered women in a Mexican city, like this one:

Midway through February, in an alley in the center of the city, some garbagemen found another dead woman. She was about thirty and dressed

in a black skirt and low-cut white blouse. She had been stabbed to death, although contusions from multiple blows were visible about her face and abdomen. In her purse was a ticket for the nine a.m. bus to Tucson, a bus she would never catch. Also found were a lipstick, powder, eyeliner, Kleenex, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, and a package of condoms. There was no passport or appointment book or anything that might identify her. Nor was she carrying a lighter or matches.

They read like coroner's reports. Bolaño relentlessly catalogues each and every grisly murder, all of women, all in St. Teresa, a fictional stand-in for Ciudad Juárez. Clearly something sinister and horrific was happening to the poor women of this city, but this part of the novel baffled and bewildered me at first. I completely understood *what* I was being told, but I didn't understand *why* I was being told it.

As the pages turned and the corpses piled up, I slowly began to see the portrait of St. Teresa Bolaño had painted, how he had insinuated, intimated, *suggested* all its elements, exclusively through droll and seemingly agenda-less language, and how this grim perspective, coupled with Bolaño's patience in

supplying it, creates not only a three-dimensional picture of a complex metropolis but also one filtered through, and thus forever defined by, the incidents in the foreground. Bolaño subtly forces the reader to equate St. Teresa with unsolved monstrosities, which animates the city into grotesque and foreboding life, emboldened and empowered by the menacing synecdoche of what seems to be a conspiracy of serial murderers.

In the dim, intermittently flashing lights of New York's subways, the drowsy riders with the clash of economies written on their ambivalent faces and the whole underground, underbelly vibe of it all—the woman in her mid-twenties, leaning her hooded head on her crossed forearms, the old man in a suit resting his head on the back of the seat, his face craned toward the roof of the train car, the sky—these images, I realized, had become synecdoches, a cross-section of citizens coursing through the city like blood, a banal, everyday occurrence that somehow captures New York more honestly than skylines or celebrities or the grandiloquence of Gershwin. Like the murders in St. Teresa—a subject I'm sure no one would want associated with their hometown—New Yorkers' daily commute, in all its tired misery and claustrophobic