

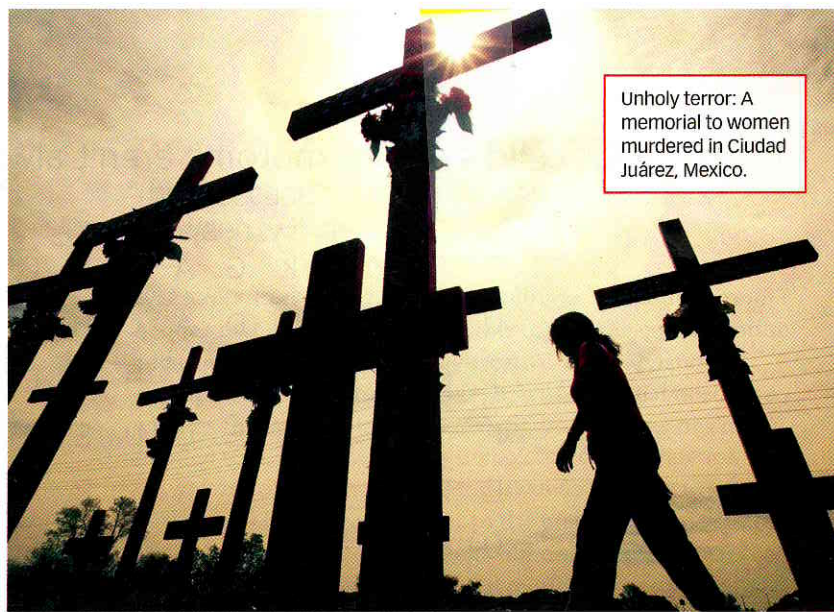
Lines in the Sand

A literary supernova's powerful novel of life and death on the Mexican border

CHILEAN NOVELIST and poet Roberto Bolaño died in 2003, at only 50, cutting short a career that swept over the literary world like a tidal wave. His final novel, *2666* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux), published posthumously, takes on the real-life subject of hundreds of women who have been found killed over the last 15 years in the desert outside Ciudad Juárez on the Mexican-American border, one of the most disturbing series of crimes in Latin American history.

Holding a reviewer's copy of *2666* in public was like brandishing the newest Harry Potter at the playground three months before the on-sale date. Half a dozen eager strangers who'd heard about the book spoke to me while I was reading it. Bolaño has particularly captured the imaginations of younger readers because his work is rather like a video game or a set of nested Web pages, stories within stories with many apparent authors, and little sense of predetermined purpose. This five-part novel jumps from subject to subject, asking you to intuit the relevance of each to each: an obscure German novelist, a sad Mexican professor, reporters on the Juárez murders,

policemen, and more. Bolaño recognizes that we live in a cacophony of a million public voices—his work evokes American pulp, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, and Mexican surrealist Juan Rulfo, a fluid range of styles held together in a structural grip all Bolaño's own. Every scene is powerful and realistic; yet the overall effect is hallucinatory and dreamlike. What he captures so artfully is how a world headed toward chaos, exploitation, and violence can still be home to souls guided by gentleness and truth. The book is long and intense, but it is also the work of an extraordinary artist facing certain ultimate realities, and so will repay every moment of attention you can give it. —VINCE PASSARO



Unholy terror: A memorial to women murdered in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico.



PAGING ABE

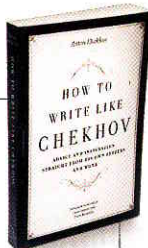
Our 16th president as wordsmith

FRED KAPLAN'S *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (Harper) will make Americans long for that era when the man we elected to hold our nation's highest office cared urgently about the beauties, the rhythms, the proper use—and misuse—of the English language. This revealing view of our 16th president focuses on his literary skills, on his deep appreciation for the classics, and on his lifelong search for the most precise and eloquent way to communicate his convictions and his ideas.

Kaplan provides a thorough account of what

Lincoln read: Shakespeare, Emerson, the poems of Byron and Burns, works of history and philosophy. Even more compelling is Kaplan's take on the suppleness with which Honest Abe altered his tone and choice of words to suit whatever he was writing—speeches, letters, even poems. An early draft of an essay on tariffs displays the easy wit with which Lincoln faced down the humorless Stephen Douglas in the debates, and the ways Lincoln used material from his own life to make a political point. In this election season, Fred Kaplan's book might encourage us all to bear in mind the relationship between clear speech and clear thought, and perhaps to vote on—among other critical issues—how thoughtfully a candidate puts one word after another. —FRANCINE PROSE

Chekhov's Complaint



In 1888, after winning Russia's prestigious Pushkin Prize, Anton Chekhov consulted his inner critic, then wrote the following to his publisher, Alexei Suvorin:

“ I DO NOT like the fact that I am successful; the plots that are still in my head are fretting with jealous irritation over the ones I have already put down in writing. It annoys me to think that all the stuff that is nonsense is already written up while the good material is still sitting around in the warehouse like unsold inventory. Of course, there is a lot of exaggeration in my whining...but there is also a dole—a sizable dole—of truth.... Either I am an idiot and a conceited fool, or I am an organism capable of becoming a good writer. Everything I am writing at present bores me and leaves me indifferent, but everything that is still only in my head interests me, moves me, and excites me. From all of this I have concluded that everyone else is on the wrong track and I am the only one who knows the secret of what needs to be done. This is probably what most writers think. Anyhow, these are the kinds of issues that would drive the devil himself crazy.”

From *How to Write Like Chekhov: Advice and Inspiration, Straight from His Own Letters and Work* (Da Capo)