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THE JOURNAL OF ANTONIO MONTOYA

By Rick Collignon

208 pp. : MacMurray & Beck

Like Kafka's "Metamorphosis," Rick Collignon's debut novel begins with what seems to be its climax: "Jose Montoya's mother and father were killed early one warm August morning by a cow." But death's neither mighty nor dreadful enough in this quirky tale to be climactic. As Jose's aunt Ramona, a painter, stands at the graveside, Jose's mother sits up in her casket and, "running her fingers through her hair threading out the rain," asks Ramona to take the boy. This deceased, if chatty, sister-in-law becomes just the first of the ghosts the 44-year-old Ramona must live with. Waiting back home are her grandparents, whose death years earlier does not prevent them from cooking enchiladas or pestering Ramona to get married. The problem, for both Ramona and Mr. Collignon, is less that the novel's dead characters are still living than that its living ones are half dead. Grandma Rosa complains to Ramona, "You paint this village as if it were dead," and gives her a 1924 journal written by their relative, the village historian and sculptor Antonio Montoya. Ramona wonders ironically if "it was possible to catch something mortal from the filth on the book," as the journal's pages brim with characters brought to life and even immortalized by the scribe's depiction and the sculptor's art. Readers may wish Mr. Collignon himself had given his characters as much life or provided more than a series of isolated incidents with little story line for them to fit onto, as often this slender book feels like links without a chain. But his graceful description, inventive Southwestern surrealism and sophisticated insight into the nature of art and imagination mark Mr. Collignon's a talent well worth following.