

## ***Fever Dream: Samanta Schweblin on the Force of the Hyperobject***

When does a game stop being a game? When does the fun end? In Samanta Schweblin's *Fever Dream* (*Distancia de rescate*, literally "Rescue Distance," 2014), a family seeks to avoid the stresses of city living by renting a holiday home in the countryside some hours from Buenos Aires, Argentina. The mother (Amanda) and daughter (Nina) get there first; the father will follow along later. But as the novel opens, we know that things have gone horribly wrong. Amanda is in some kind of clinic or hospital—"The sheets are rough, they bunch up under my body. I can't move"—talking to a boy who is "murmuring into [her] ear." The boy is asking her about "worms," "worms in the body" (1). He is very insistent: "We have to find the exact moment when the worms came into being" (2); the exact moment, it is implied, when things started to go wrong.

What follows, as the feverish conversation continues (it lasts the entirety of the book; we reconstruct what has happened previously as these two characters confide in and guide each other, press each other for answers), is a tale full of ominous foreboding with no clear resolution. Amanda is dying: she has apparently been poisoned by some noxious substance that lurks in the region's interminable fields that have been turned over to the mass agricultural production of soybeans. Her daughter has suffered a similar fate, but where Nina is now is not entirely clear. Indeed, the whole story is plagued by uncertainty and anxiety, and fears that long precede Amanda and Nina's arrival at what turns out to be a far from idyllic rural retreat.

The boy, David, himself came down with a similar malady some years previously, when he was three or four, and dozens of other children in the small town where the clinic is to be found are also affected by whatever is in the water or the air. On being contaminated, they turn into what are described as monsters: "strange children. [. . .] Deformed children. They don't have eyelashes, or eyebrows. Their skin is pink, very pink, and scaly too" (158). Some have blotches or spots; some have "giant head[s]." Some have been poisoned in the womb: "around here there aren't many children who have been born right" (157). In the clinic, on the walls of what David calls a "waiting room" (109), are childish drawings, but the children are unable to sign their names to their pictures: "they can't control their arms anymore, or they can't control their own heads, or they have such thin skin that if they squeeze their markers too much their fingers end up bleeding" (122).

Apparently stuck in a permanent childhood (even though “some of them aren’t children anymore” [122]), it seems that their time for carefree play is long at an end as they are daily herded into the waiting room (but what are they waiting for?) or kept out of sight of visitors. Unseen danger lurks all around them, but nobody—except perhaps David—wants to think too hard about its cause.

Schweblin’s novel puts the reader in the worried mother’s frame of mind—or frame of body, as the book’s effect is as much visceral or corporeal as it is intellectual or mental. Indeed, *Fever Dream* avoids explication of context and setting, leaving us disturbed and perturbed. One response to the fear this book induces, and more generally to the low-level anxiety of a contaminated world (or other impending dangers apparently beyond our control, from climate change to the nuclear threat), is to secure our doors: reviewing *Fever Dream* for *The New Yorker*, Jia Tolentino tells us that she “was checking the locks in my apartment by page thirty” (“The Sick Thrill of ‘Fever Dream’”). But such measures are too late, as the poison is already with us—“The poison was always there,” says David (169). We are already part of the invisible but massive object that produces it, and in any case all barriers are permeable, no locks are safe. Schweblin would instead have us head out, return to the game, to play with new forms of assemblage that bring life, not death.

### 1. *The Chemistry of Anxiety*

Schweblin’s novel is far from being investigative journalism, though in an interview she tells us that she “did a lot of research, and I contacted scientists. Of course, none of this is seen in the novel because the novel is told from the perspective of someone who does not understand the dangers they are witnessing” (Hullender, “Claudia Llosa & Samanta Schweblin Interview”). But it is no great secret that the novel’s context is the boom in soybean production in Latin America, particularly in Argentina, over the past couple of decades. As an article for the agrochemical trade association CropLife International puts it: “The soybean is king in Argentina.” Soy is “the country’s main export—valued higher than Argentina’s cereal, automotive and petrochemical exports. Today, 60 percent of the world’s soy biodiesel, and more than 40 percent of global soybean oil and soy meal production, originates in Argentina” (“Soybeans in Argentina”). Sixty per cent of the country’s arable land is devoted to the crop’s cultivation, usually on a massive scale that has led to widespread deforestation, especially in the northern provinces, site of the Gran Chaco (which also extends into Bolivia and Paraguay), otherwise rich in biodiversity and

home to many of Argentina's indigenous peoples. In Brazil, a similar boom in soy cultivation has contributed to deforestation in the Amazon. Soy, almost entirely produced for export (mostly to China, the European Union, and India), also displaces family farms, tending towards a monoculture operated at industrial scale by relatively few firms while impoverished small farmers and laborers leave the countryside for the cities. Prices of staples such as tomatoes and potatoes have therefore increased, threatening food security for much of the population (Frayssinet, "The Dilemma of Soy in Argentina"). No doubt the boom brings in much-needed foreign currency (the price of soy on the international markets went up four-fold in the decade from 2001 to 2012) and ten per cent of the country's tax revenue, one element in a Latin American commodities boom that enabled left-wing governments to strengthen the welfare state, redistributing windfall profits to the neediest. Despite all this, in the longer term it is at very best a double-edged sword.

Practically all the soy sown in Argentina—and indeed, elsewhere in South America—is transgenic, or genetically modified. Above all, such modifications are designed to make the plant resistant to herbicide: so-called "Roundup Ready Soybean" is produced by the Missouri-based agrochemical giant Monsanto and was introduced to Argentina in 1996. As the name suggests, it is sold as a package with the herbicide glyphosate, branded by Monsanto (which has since been bought out by the German multinational, Bayer) under the trade name "Roundup." The idea is that genetically-modified soy fields can be liberally sprayed with the herbicide without damaging the crop itself. But with increasing glyphosate resistance in the so-called weeds, more and more herbicide is required in a genetic arms race with the local flora. Argentina is the heaviest user of glyphosate per capita in the world—spraying more than twice as much per acre than farmers in the United States. In the early 2010s, the country's use of herbicide rose exponentially (reportedly by between 185% and 1,000%; sources vary). Yet accounts from residents in rural areas and numerous scientific studies, contested of course by Monsanto/Bayer, have repeatedly shown rising rates of miscarriages, birth defects, and cancers in the areas where glyphosate use is concentrated (Ávila-Vázquez, "Devastating Impacts of Glyphosate Use"). In 2015, the World Health Organization's International Agency for Research on Cancer declared that glyphosate, which has been detected in the water, soil, and sediment of soy-growing regions, was "probably carcinogenic to humans" (Cressey,

“Widely Used Herbicide Linked to Cancer”). In 2020, facing thousands of lawsuits, Bayer agreed, without admitting liability, to pay \$10 billion “to settle tens of thousands of current and potential U.S. claims that its weedkiller Roundup causes cancer” (Denham, “Bayer”). The controversy around the use of herbicides in Argentine soy production came to a head in 2014/2015, precisely at the time that Schweblin’s novel was published.



Soybean field in Formosa, Argentina

Yet *Fever Dream* provides none of these figures or contextual information. Terms such as “herbicide,” let alone “glyphosate,” are absent from the narrative. Soy is mentioned only as ever-present backdrop—“The soy fields stretch out to either side of us. It’s all very green, a perfumed green” (93). Nobody makes the connection between agribusiness and contamination. In the novel itself, the question of what has caused the strange maladies suffered by Amanda, David, Nina, and the area’s other children, goes unanswered. Even as the narrative ends, all we are left with is uncertainty, suspicion, and a generalized sense of doom. Why is this? What is the effect of such apparent evasiveness, this avoidance of

explication in favour of allusion or suggestion? How does it affect our experience of the book? Pause the video to think about these questions, and write down some thoughts in your notebook. While you do that, I'll have a glass of bottled water, but I'll be right back.

#### Drinks Pairing: Bottled Water

When Amanda is first brought in to the clinic—a clinic that, in this small town, has no full-time doctor; “those doctors they call in to the clinic always take hours to arrive, and they don’t know anything and can’t do anything” (20)—she is fobbed off by the nurse on duty, who tells her “You’ve just had a little too much sun” (137) and gives her and Nina some pills and a couple of cups of water from the water fountain. But the people who live in the neighbourhood know that the water cannot be trusted: the first time Amanda meets David’s mother she is asked whether she had “noticed the way the water smelled too. [. . .] She said it was better not to use the tap water that day” (144, 145). After all, David got sick after he “put his hands in the water” of a small stream and then “suck[ed] on his fingers” (16). And Amanda and Nina fall ill after sitting on ground that is wet with what could be dew—“but it’s not [. . .] dew, is it?” (105)—near where some farm labourers are unloading barrels from a truck. Later they go looking for bottled water in town, with the hope that “poisoning is cured by drinking lots of water” (153). But there is no way to distinguish poison from cure. You cannot drink the water; you cannot *not* drink it, either.

The dialogue between Amanda and David that structures Schweblin’s novel is driven by a sense of urgency. We are told that time is limited—“I’m going to die in a few hours,” Amanda says. “That’s going to happen, isn’t it?” (5). Meanwhile, David coaxes her to tell her story so that they can “find the exact moment when the worms came into being. [. . .] Because it’s important. It’s very important for us all” (2). At times it is as though, for David, Amanda were a privileged witness, and he is struggling to process her testimony in time, to make the right connections so as to figure out how the environment, the social structure, the plants and what is added to them, and people’s choices to speak or keep silence have all coincided in an assemblage of human and non-human actors that have collectively poisoned an entire generation. He brusquely tries to sift the evidence she offers, determining what is important and what not in his quest for knowledge, piecing

together the clues like a detective who needs to know every detail to track down the perpetrator of a crime.

At other times, however, it is as though he already knows, and that his aim instead is to help Amanda come to the same realization that he has already reached, but in her own way and on her own terms. From this perspective their conversation is, as Lily Meyer's review of the book suggests, "a warped child's game": Twenty Questions or "I Spy with my Little Eye," for which Amanda has to guess what David already knows, guided only by his indications as to what is "important" and what is not, whether she is "warm" or "cold" as she approaches the target he has set for her. In Meyer's words: "He sounds like he's on a treasure hunt, or playing the sort of prolonged imaginary game little kids invent, the ones where no adult can comprehend the rules. This is important, he says, or this is unimportant, and Amanda, sick as she is, plays along" ("Brief but Creepy"). But by the end he becomes frustrated: we learn that he has persuaded Amanda to tell her story over and over ("You've already told me four times how you got here" [110]), but still she does not get it; "you still haven't realized. You still need to understand" (131). He is repeatedly tempted to give up: "I'm starting to think you're not going to understand, that going forward with this story doesn't make any sense. [. . .] It's not worth it anymore" (140). Why continue playing a game when one of the participants does not grasp or follow the rules, when everything degenerates into misunderstanding? There is no reward in that!

## 2. *The Shadow of the Hyperobject*

The novel puts us, the readers, in the same situation as Amanda. We are groping around, trying to make sense of things. . . how much of this, after all, is a "fever dream," a hallucination that will disappear once the fever breaks? Has David's soul really been transmigrated—as his mother seems to believe—into another body, so as to save him from the sickness? Is it even David at Amanda's bedside, or is it Nina ("I'm David," she tells her mother, in what may be a dream within the dream [74]), whose soul perhaps has migrated into David's body? Again, none of these doubts are cleared up with the book's conclusion, precisely because its aim is to put us in that same state of suspicion and anxiety, and not to shake us from it. This is a novel that seeks not to explain or to convince, but to conjure up an affect, to make us doubt our own senses, perhaps even to make us believe we may have worms within us from some un-noticed contact with foreign bodies that are almost imperceptible, with "something small and invisible that has ruined

everything” (160). After all, this is not simply about Argentina: it is about a global industry, with chemicals patented in the United States, sold by a German firm, and made in factories in the USA or China; with soy grown on the pampa exported to London, Delhi, or Beijing. We are all complicit, all contaminated (and contaminating others). When will we realize?

Agribusiness is an instance of what theorist Timothy Morton terms “hyperobjects,” which he defines as “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” The examples he gives include “a black hole [. . .] the Lago Agrio oil field in Ecuador, [. . .] the Florida Everglades [. . .] Styrofoam or plastic bags, or the sum of all the whirring machines of capitalism” (*Hyperobjects* 1). The point about hyperobjects is that they cannot be taken in or comprehended from any single perspective: there is no privileged site from which they can be clearly visualized; they cannot be directly seen, and there is always more of them elsewhere. They stretch too far in the distance (both spatial and temporal) for us to see where they begin and where they end. On the other hand, they may also be uncomfortably close: we may not see a hyperobject because we cannot take our distance from it, because we are already implicated, already complicit in its workings. “We can only see pieces [. . .] at a time” (70). At the same time, hyperobjects exist on such a scale that they do not depend upon us: even if (like capitalism or agribusiness) they are human constructs, they are also post-human in that they long since acquired a life and logic of their own, seemingly impervious to human agency.

*As with a game we have started that gets out of hand, it can feel that all we can do is look on as events unfold when confronted with the seemingly irresistible force of a hyperobject in motion once a tipping point has been passed.* If anything, hyperobjects interact mostly with other hyperobjects: markets with machines, ecosystems with cultures, global tides with global waste, microplastics with human biology, international commodity prices with soy fields that stretch to the horizon and beyond. Perhaps, however, more optimistically, they can be detained or brought down by other hyperobjects, too: by social movements or class struggle, or even by the networks constructed through literature as evidenced by a novel first published in Spain, but written by an Argentine woman living in Berlin, a book that won a Mexican prize before being translated into English for an American publisher that originated in the UK, so that we can read and be affected (perhaps outraged) by it in Canada and elsewhere.



*Fever Dream* is also about parental responsibility: Amanda is fearful of letting Nina out of her sight, having inherited from her own mother the nagging premonition that “Sooner or later something bad is going to happen” (56). Hence the notion of “rescue distance” that gives the novel its (original, Spanish) title. This is the idea that a mother should always be close enough to her children to be able to come to their aid in a moment of peril. The precise distance is variable and always changing: “I spend half the day calculating, though I always risk more than I should” (19). There is therefore a centripetal impulse to Amanda’s parenting: when she perceives potential danger, she tugs on what she imagines as an invisible but palpably embodied (affective) cord that binds parent and child. But when Nina dips her hands in the poisoned “dew,” Amanda is right beside her: “I’m sitting ten inches away from my daughter, David. There is no rescue distance” (85). Perhaps centrifugal forces offer more hope. The outside may be contaminated, the environment may be toxic, but staying cooped up will neither change that nor protect us. David’s mother tells Amanda that, before the malady struck, her child’s “favorite thing was the outside. He was crazy about the playground, even when he was very tiny” (10). Now that play has abruptly come to an end, and David is kept inside, out of sight. But perhaps it is only by opening up, looking outwards and making new connections, that there is hope to mobilize an assemblage that could displace or even replace the mass industry of export monoculture and its toxic by-products.

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Song: "The End of the Game" (Weezer)