David Toscana (Monterrey, 1961) is a prolific postmodern novelist who has won quite a number of prestigious awards and whose works have been translated into a surprising number of languages. El último lector (Mexico: Random House/Mondadori, 2004), the book that we are concerned with here, for example, has been published in translation in Brazil, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Sweden, and the USA. In addition to these countries’ respective languages, other books by Toscana have been translated into German, Greek, Arabic, Serbian. We will return to this briefly at the end.

Although considered by some as a member of the new group of writers of Northern Mexico, there is less that is ostensibly regional in this novel than feverishly metafictional. The reader of the title, Lucio, is a public librarian in Icamole, a very small Mexican town where, as the government soon realizes, nobody reads, so that the authorities abandon this useless cultural project and discontinue sending books to the library or a monthly salary to the protagonist. The latter consequently becomes the counterpart of the starving artist, that iconic and heroic figure of an earlier modernity: Lucio is instead the starving reader of postmodernity, rendered crotchety by hunger, by bad literature, by his nostalgia for beauty and for, we learn in the end, his dead wife. All this sounds much clearer than what the novel presents to us, however, and may be no more than a willful summary based on the literary notion of “character.” Is Lucio a character, though, or a ventriloquist’s marionette? After all, most of
what we learn about him comes from his ramblings about literature, which are of two types: his apodeictic comments on what he thinks is good or unacceptable in the novels he reads (a majority of them are deemed unacceptable and thrown into the dark room where the roaches eat them), and his retelling of random plots that in his view have some grounding connection with events around him. The latter, the proliferation of other stories recalled as explanations of what is happening, leads us to what most reviewers see as the plot of *The Last Reader*. If “character” may not work let us try “plot.”

The corpse of a young girl appears in the well of Lucio’s son who, fearing the arbitrariness of the Mexican police, asks his father for advice on how to dispose of the body. Lucio promptly pulls out a book from the shelf and tells his son to do what the protagonist of that novel has done, i.e., to bury the corpse under his avocado tree. When the police come to question him, Lucio pulls out a different book and reads a significant passage that misleads the police into carting off poor old Melquisedec, at present the water carrier for the town and soon a victim of the justice system. No skin off Lucio’s nose, apparently. The young dead girl, Anamari, is renamed Babette by Lucio, based, once again, on a novel—this one about the French Revolution, when young and beautiful and aristocratic Babette is accosted by a mob, knocks on a mansion’s door and is mysteriously pulled in, never to be heard from again. Finally, we overhear a conversation between the ghosts of the author of the Babette novel and of the old Mexican dictator Porfirio Díaz, both buried in Montparnasse. In this conversation, Díaz pleads with the author to write a novel about him: only literature can make characters immortal, insists Díaz. As we eventually learn, these are really the voices of Lucio and Anamari’s elegant mother. She impersonates Porfirio Díaz, Lucio is the author
of Babette’s story. Ghosts speak through Anamari’s mother and Lucio. Lucio/author finally yields to his interlocutor’s wishes and agrees to write a novel about Díaz. Could this be the novel we are reading?

The successive names of Lucio’s library suggest a Mexican historical chronology. The Díaz científicos and their world view, or perhaps even some enlightenment scientist, is here represented by a German naturalist who became a writer of fiction and who described Icamole (at least Lucio is sure it is his town) as having been the ocean in precambric times; in his honor, Lucio names the original library Biblioteca Haslinger. By order of the authorities, the library is renamed Biblioteca Fidencio Arriaga after a teacher and union leader who, we assume, represents here the time of President Cárdenas, when the Mexican Revolution reached its radical apex and would have given recognition to this teacher; of course, the novel cannot refrain from informing us that the teacher and union leader was knifed in a brawl (the rabble again). In the present time, as “the plot” unfolds, the library is once more renamed by Lucio as Biblioteca Babette, as if the function of the library, and of literature, were now to constantly snatch beauty from the hands of revolution (which is what I take the Babette episode to mean). In more mythical terms, “Babette” names the arché, the body of a dead young woman feeding the roots of the local tree, “the only green tree left."

It is tempting to conclude that The Last Reader is ideologically revisionist, in line with official historical revisionism in Mexico. In 1992, when the government issued new history books for 4th-6th grades, the whole country was in an uproar, from the streets to the congress. In the words of the Los Angeles Times, for example, critics charged that free-market reformer President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had hired his intellectual buddies to ideologically
revise--or distort--Mexican history and to justify his own neo-liberal economic program. “The government is trying to bury Mexico’s revolutionary past, critics say, glorifying the repressive but economically prosperous ‘Porfiriato,’ as the Díaz regime was called, while minimizing social reformers Zapata and Villa. . . . Political scientist Luis Javier Garrido wrote [that] ‘The history of Mexico has been a continual struggle for independence, social justice and popular sovereignty through democracy, and this leitmotif is absent from these texts, which only attempt to legitimize the ‘system.’”¹ By citing the shortcomings of revolutionary heroes like Zapata, critics contended, the books supported the Government’s recent changes in the land-tenure system that had long been celebrated as a revolutionary achievement.² These land-tenure changes were done, we should add, in preparation for the signing of the NAFTA treaty, and were decisive in triggering the Zapatista uprising of January 1, 1994. But this uprising happened in the South, in Chiapas, while Toscana’s novel takes place in tiny Icamole, near Monterrey, in the North, where a provincial, down and out middle class longs for “beauty,” builds a chapel on the burial site of a fallen soldier of Porfirio Díaz and saves his letter to his love Evangelina as a relic. The novel seems to know nothing of such southern uprisings; nor should it, of course, and that may be its “regional” character. It also seems to know nothing of the femicides of young women in Juarez, much closer to Icamole’s latitude and to the heart of the novel, in which, after all, it is the unsolved death of a young girl that starts the plot. The result, though, is that while we are left perplexed by the linkage between eroticism and the mysterious death of a beautiful girl in this and other novels of Toscana, we are disturbed that, in El último lector, the young girl’s death is made to function as a symbol that leads to Paris and the past, i.e., to the upper class, radically foreclosing its proximity to
other deaths. In the sense in which Alain Badiou introduces
the term, we could say that there is something Thermidorean
in this text, which renders the constellation of concepts
such as revolution-justice-emancipation unthinkable and
unintelligible. Such a constitution of the unthinkable
provides for a destitution of thought. I wonder if it is for
these very Thermidorean reasons that the great publishing
conglomerates translated this novel into so many languages.

The complexity of the text functions like a cloud of
ink thrown off by a squid, and this must have made the
translator’s task more difficult. Asa Zatz’s clear and engaging
prose helps make the book legible and accessible in English.
But inevitably he trips in a few places, at times through a
shift in emphasis—a not infrequent mistake in translations
of Latin American literature. When the Spanish says “se
aseguraba que” (40), for example, we get here “it goes without
saying” (p. 34). The Spanish means that public opinion held
that prisoners were tortured, while the English version gives
this an added tone of ironic superiority: it goes without saying
that prisoners are tortured. In fact, all these sentences in this
paragraph turn out to be confusing. It does not help that the
proofreader skips a typo here, so that we get “Pay no intention
to that” instead of “Pay no attention.” In other places, the
error is not of tone but of fact or perhaps misunderstanding
prepositions. For example, we are told in English that Lucio
enjoys the story of the ancient walled city of huge churches
and castles that Paolo Lucarelli “traces back to some distant
century” (p. 54); the Spanish says that Lucarelli “traza [la
historia] desde algún siglo remoto” (60). In Spanish, Lucarelli
writes from=desde some remote century—which is confirmed
in the next sentence. Finally, I will mention the concluding
sentence of a chapter, with Lucio speaking (about literature,
of course): “Everybody looks for a happy ending, he says, his
face beaming . . .” (p. 106). In Spanish what Lucio says is that
people look for a happy ending, [look for] a smiling face, . .  
“to avoid tragedy” (110). It is not, as in English, Lucio’s face that we see smiling. That would have been a first.

