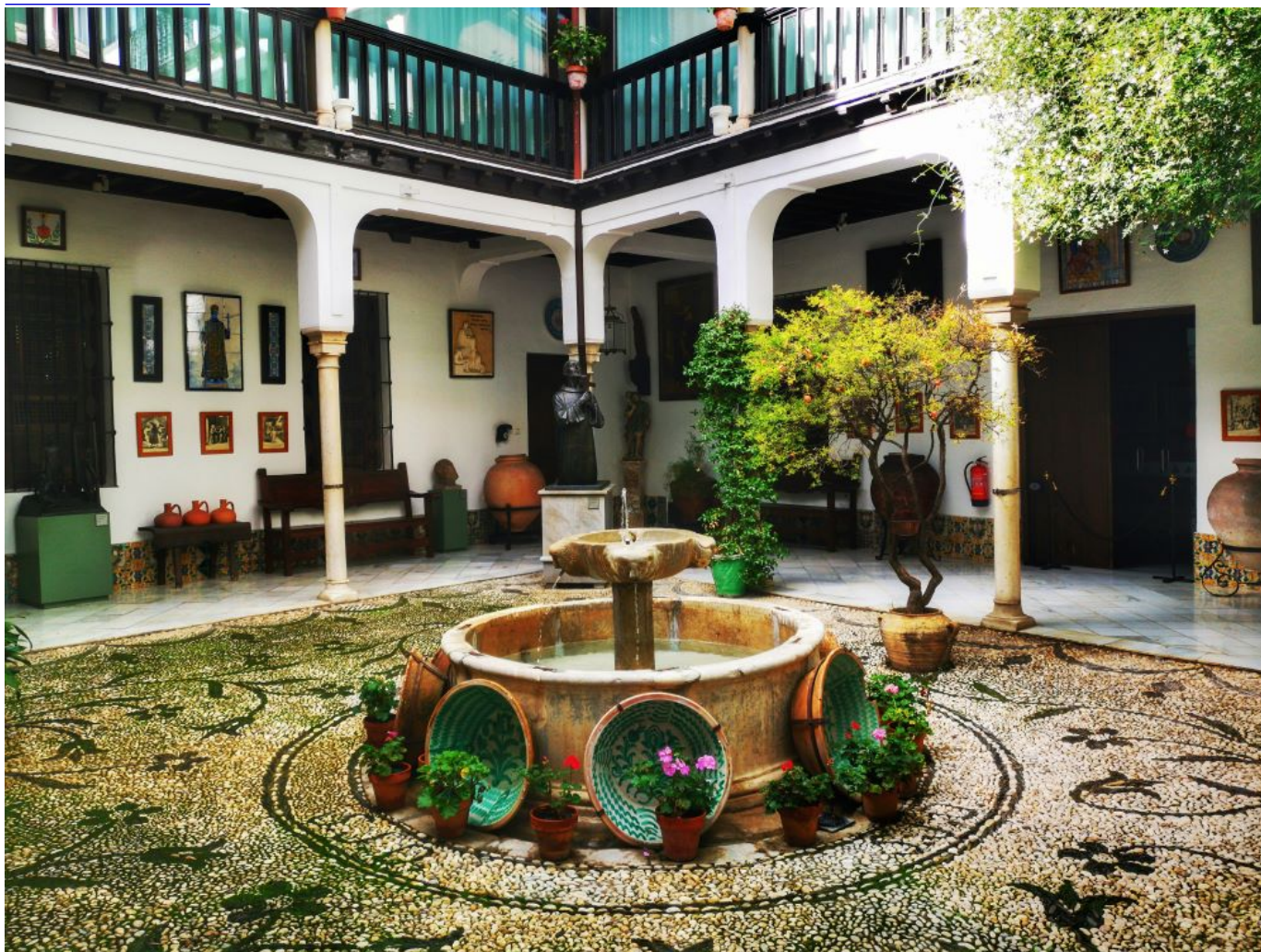


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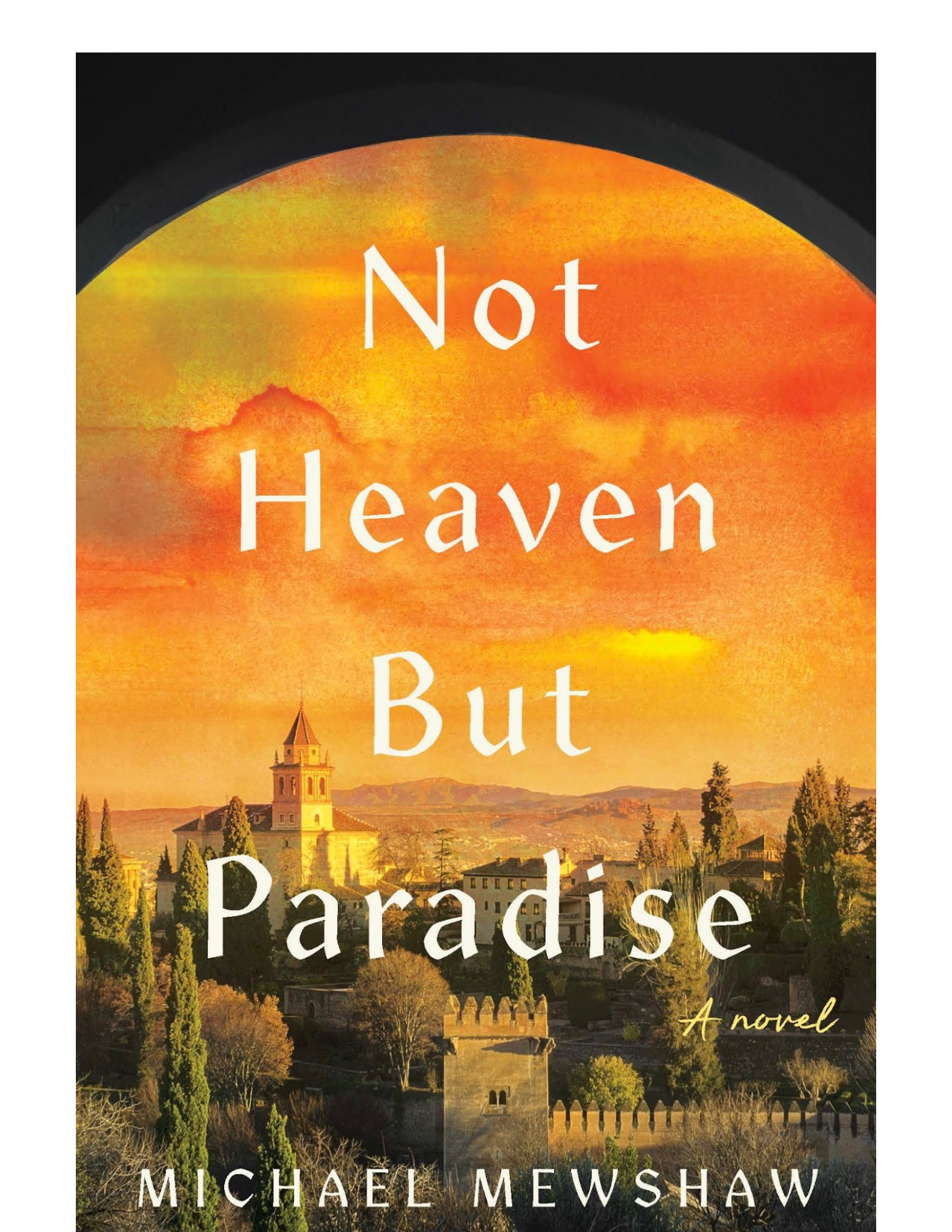
March 29, 2025

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American damage is the story underneath the story in Michael Mewshaw's powerful literary thriller set in Granada, Spain. More than 20 books into his career, Mewshaw is deft at creating a story that is not as it appears yet is exactly as it appears. The rubbery life of a narrative relies on a sequence of perfectly normal scenes that promise to be entertaining, until the whole thing explodes and we are no longer laughing.

At the beginning of [Not Heaven But Paradise](#), American and superficially Catholic expat Paul Stewart is eagerly anticipating the arrival of a well-known American visual artist at his family home, a failing B&B-turned-artist residency. He hopes that Simone's reputation will expand his reach beyond weekend artists and academics into "a prosperous clientele" that will generate more income.





Not  
Heaven  
But  
Paradise

*A novel*

MICHAEL MEWSHAW

Not Heaven but Paradise

Michael Mewshaw

256 pages; Unbridled Books

\$26.00

Living in the house with Paul is a Black African migrant houseboy named Blessed who speaks little English and says he comes from a country "of sand and hot sun." It is worth noting that Mewshaw grew up in a Catholic home and, like his ex-pat pal Graham Greene, is a secular writer who uses symbolism at an altitude that will draw our attention to those old Catholic institutional nuisances of corruption and justice.

When approached by a U.S. State Department agent looking for a safehouse in which to install Tahar Mahmoud, a university professor who is a political prisoner of the Algerian government and a potential informant, Paul caves to their demands. (Tahar is writing a version of Camus' *The Stranger* from an Arab perspective, and there is some discussion between the Americans about *The Mersault Investigation* by the writer Kamel Daoud.) The not-so-veiled *j'accuse* is, of course, colonialism and its accompanying violence, and the worst offender today, Mewshaw posits, is America.

Everyone in the cast undergoes some kind of conversion: For Paul, not accidentally the name of the apostle and missionary, it is a wake-up call to be more charitable. Until Tahar arrives, he has lived a rather comfortable, slightly selfish and dispassionate ex-pat life. He played soccer, skied on weekends and felt that in his double-passport life, he knew what it felt like to be a refugee. The increasingly desperate Blessed — who made his way to Spain after a dangerous and humiliating journey across the Sahara — starts frequenting internet cafés and becomes radicalized over the course of the book. A third conversion is undertaken by Tahar, the scholar-intellect and a Muslim version of the namesake apostle Paul. Tahar has endured terrible suffering at the hands of an institution: the Algerian government, an analog to the American government.

Tahar is the moral center of the book and Mewshaw plays his hand well, developing an intricate game with a warning shot and a parable: After we use one another, geopolitically or personally, what is left that is meaningful? Simone's conversion takes her from a successful artist who uses everyone around her to an artist forced to see the seriousness of her own work. She paints nudes of men who pose for her on the internet, but when painting Tahar's nude portrait, she witnesses the horrific consequences of truly "free expression." Yet she paints away, without much

empathy or concern about his disability. She welcomes a sitting for a second portrait, for her artistic purposes, and is surprised and fearful for safety but not his condition when he becomes aggressive and a confrontation ensues.

He asks — of us and of the book's characters — the kinds of spiritual questions that lead to other spiritual questions, and maybe one day it all adds up to a way of being.

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Mewshaw's snappy, wise-cracking dialogue reveals how different everyone's needs are, and how, in every move and every sentence, we carefully calculate everybody else's every move and sentence. Few write satire so effectively at this caliber, but it is a card trick for Mewshaw, a writer who revels in reversals of fortune and pulls you along only to make sure you do not see what's coming.

There are resonances with themes at play in contemporary writing: the simultaneously hateful and apologist European position towards refugees, and the doomsday feeling that society is unlivable, so it is better to create a utopia for yourself. Mewshaw is making it clear that these utopian mini-residencies, cults, communes and private societies are no better than the societies that their anxious or vagabond residents cannot endure.

A spate of literary thrillers have focused on American and European literary communes or activist collectives upended when one character throws a wrench into the idyll: Eleanor Catton's *Birnam Wood* and Rachel Kushner's *Creation Lake* come to mind, and Jenny Erpenbeck's *Go, Went, Gone* offers a European version of a man who gets wrapped up with African migrants and, out of charity or loneliness, changes his life. Now there is *The Colony* by the Swedish writer Annika Norlin, grouping together rootless, unwanted people who are either in a shared experience or a cult.

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Mewshaw offers no apologies for the mistakes of his characters or for writing about Arab terrorism, because he is showing us exactly how and where it gets created. He

has shaped a fast-paced narrative out of psychological insights and Catholic panic. The book is a page-turner, efficient and fun, and a searing indictment of American policy and its dehumanizing force. The counterweight is Catholic, Muslim and international at once: Join ranks with those who are less fortunate and ask yourself a profound and difficult question. What is the difference between institutions populated with radically indifferent covert operatives and terrorists who become radically indifferent covert operatives?

As the novel unfolds, the pacing picks up and the climax is the only possible outcome of the sequence of events. It makes you wonder what the Cold War really cost us, and how to move forward to become, well, a superpower with good intentions and, personally, a decent person instead of a coward. Paul Stewart is such a character. He carries the weight of American trauma and the extreme behavior that our policies pressed into today's world.

What stands out as doubly effective is the way that Mewshaw gives us not only a political take but a Catholic one, and brings the book from our geopolitical era into theological time. As a narrator, he asks — of us and of the book's characters — the kinds of spiritual questions that lead to other spiritual questions, and maybe one day it all adds up to a way of being. For Mewshaw, the irony of being a nonpracticing Catholic is the inevitable realization that you become Catholic not by casual practice but by making mistakes and taking decisive action to redeem those mistakes.

The book ends during Holy Week, in a crowd walking toward the Alhambra, a sprawling palace and garden complex not unlike Eden, and the uphill walk is a nod to the purgatorial transformation that people of all stripes — Catholic, Muslim, tourist — are seeking. It is a Catholic vision of a united pilgrimage in which everyone on the circuit has a shot at grace, not because they have done something unusual, but because they have found their way to the right place.