

# The Columbus Dispatch

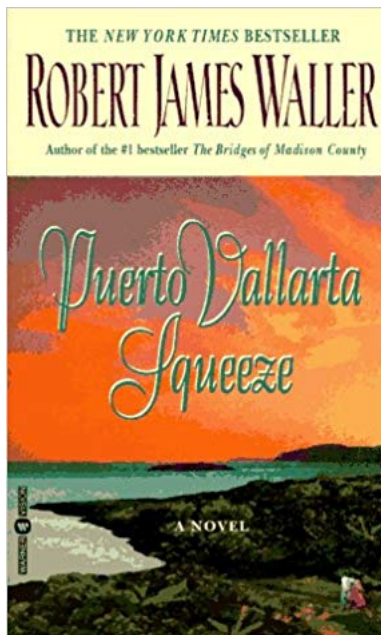
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## 'BRIDGES' AUTHOR GOES TOO FAR - AGAIN

*Nancy McAllister, For The Dispatch*

With his latest novel, Robert James Waller, author of *The Bridges of Madison County*, has tried his hand at writing in a new direction.

*Puerto Vallarta Squeeze* is a poorly written action-adventure thriller combined with his usual sloppy love story.

Set in Mexico, the book tells the story of a down-and-out writer, Danny Pastor, who is suffering from writer's block. To pass the time Danny takes up with Luz Maria, a Mexican prostitute who wears a T-shirt bearing the slogan *Puerto Vallarta Squeeze* and a conspicuously placed illustration of two lime slices.

Luz is beautiful, of course. She is also pure and deeply religious, though she does like to eat in provocative, suggestive ways. Danny likes to make love to her while she flings her head from side to side and calls out for her savior.

Danny witnesses a murder while he and Luz are drinking in a bar. Luz doesn't see the killing.

"The shooter," as he is called throughout the story, offers Danny a few thousand dollars to get him to the border. Danny accepts, thinking he might be able to break out of his writer's block, make some big money, and finally become a real novelist. Luz begs to go, and the three of them set off on one of the most underwhelming adventure stories ever written.

Luz and "the shooter" fall in love; the government organizes a massive manhunt; and Danny frees a penned-up ocelot in honor of "the shooter."  
Puerto Vallarta Squeeze reads as if it were written by Hemingway's dumber brother. Hemingway's staccato sentences march you tautly through his books; Waller's trip you up and make you stumble while trying to find your way through his maze of incomplete, incorrect sentences.

Waller builds his characters' fictional world through thinly veiled and ridiculous psychological profiles. He also is generous in his use of trite phrases. One can almost see him clicking a mouse on some fiction-writing phrase program designed to create a best seller.

Point of view also is a problem. Waller jumps from mind to mind of his characters without warning or reason.

Breaking the well-learned rules to create an exciting work can be an artist's most lofty goal; but Waller breaks the rules indiscriminately, and apparently without knowing what he is doing. The result is anything but fresh.

Alas, that probably won't prevent this silly book from selling.

**Nancy McAllister** is a member of the National Book Critics Circle.