

**Skinner, José. *The Search Committee*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 2025.
ISBN: 979-8-89375-007-2. Pbk. \$18.95.**

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Accepted: Fall 2025 / Published online: Spring 2025
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Much like its South Texas-Mexico border setting, José Skinner's *The Search Committee* defies easy characterization. Part thriller, part mystery, part campus novel, part satire, *The Search Committee* is a raucous romp that plays with familiar stereotypes while using funhouse mirrors to bring societal, academic, and geographical constructs into sharp relief.

As a novelist, Skinner is a trickster of considerable talent and wit. In *The Search Committee*, he tosses his characters into a topsy-turvy world of cartels, academic politics, and espionage. In this world, trusting too easily, acting on bad information, or even choosing the wrong place to have lunch can have disastrous consequences, as Assistant Professor William Quigley of Bravo University quickly learns.

A Minnesota transplant, Quigley volunteers to pick up Minerva Mondragón, a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico, at the airport. Mondragón's visit is high stakes (in the academic world), as she is the last candidate in a tenure-track search that will be canceled if Mondragón turns down an offer as previous candidates have. If the search is canceled, Quigley's ability to earn tenure (and a rare permanent faculty role in English) may be in jeopardy. Intent on impressing Mondragón, against his better judgment, Quigley agrees when she asks to have lunch across the border in a La Reina, a small town known for cartel activity just eight miles from campus. At lunch, Mondragón disappears after excusing herself to go to the bathroom. Instead of alerting authorities, Quigley panics and reports Mondragón as a spacy, no-show to his fellow search committee members. This fabrication doesn't ring true to Dr. Douglas Burris, Mondragón's dissertation director, who drives to South Texas from New Mexico to search for the missing Mondragón. In trying to get to the truth, Burris implies connections to a federally funded center that trains spies and puts Mondragón in even more danger.

Skinner's many literary and pop culture allusions add to the novel's kaleidoscopic feel. Minerva Mondragón evokes Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997). Far from his Upper Midwest roots, Quigley fancies himself living in a Graham Greene spy novel. Eduardo Gamboa Jr., the accidental cartel leader, is referred to as "Fredo" from Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969). Burris likens his journey from New Mexico to South Texas to Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (2005). These references situate the novel within multiple genres while providing a shorthand to characterization.

The Search Committee falls primarily within the satirical campus novel tradition, while incorporating elements from other genres to humorous effect. In this regard, *The Search Committee* is an instant classic that should be read alongside Richard Russo's *Straight Man* (1997) and David Lodge's *Changing Places: A Tale of Two Campuses* (1975), which also feature English departments. As a comic caper featuring quirky characters, *The Search Committee* is in league with Carl Hiaasen's best novels about South Florida. Skinner also makes an important contribution to Texas border literature by revealing the seemingly endless paradoxes that make living in South Texas so interesting. Years ago, as a South Texas friend with roots predating the Republic of Texas,

explained, “The border moves, but we haven’t.”

Bravo student Omar Garza is perhaps the most intriguing character in the novel. He lives north of the border but has extensive family connections in La Reina. Among the main characters, he holds the lowest societal rank but is plugged into the power structures on both sides of the border. He is a conduit for information and skillfully negotiates multiple cross-cultural misunderstandings as Mondragón’s fate remains uncertain. Garza is translator, diplomat, teacher, and consigliere. He also evokes the Caterpillar in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and Morpheus in *The Matrix* (1999), when he gives Quigley yellow pills to adjust his perception to his reality. Garza’s advice for how to take the yellow pills sets up one of the best classroom scenes in the novel: “Wash it down with Red Bull, sir. Red Bull and chochos, you’re alert and relaxed at the same time. Can’t beat that” (207).

A wonderfully complex novel, *The Search Committee* may frustrate readers who don’t have a working knowledge of Spanish or familiarity with the literary and pop culture allusions. In addition, in late 2025, *The Search Committee* feels strangely dated. The reader wonders whether Border Studies programs will continue to exist and whether Burris’s Intelligence Center for Academic Practice has lost its federal funding. Here’s hoping that Skinner writes a sequel featuring many of the same characters navigating these changes with as much resourcefulness as they demonstrate in *The Search Committee*.

In *The Search Committee*, Skinner writes what he knows. Born in Puerto Rico, Skinner grew up in Mexico City and attended the Universidad Iberoamericana. After working as a Spanish-English translator in the New Mexico, he graduated the Iowa Writers’ Workshop with an MFA in fiction. For many years, he was a professor of literature and creative writing and director of the bilingual MFA program at Texas-Pan American University. His previous works include two short story collections, *Fight and Other Stories* (2001) and *The Tombstone Race* (2016) and, as well as numerous translations, essays, and works of fiction in literary journals and anthologies. *Fight and Other Stories* was a Barnes & Noble Discover New Writers selection and a finalist for the Western States Book Award and the Drue Heinz Literature Prize. *The Tombstone Race* won the Writer’s League of Texas Discovery Prize in 2016. In 2018, he was inducted into the Texas Institute of Letters. In 2023, he and his wife opened the Alienated Majesty Bookstore in Austin, TX.