

KIRKUS REVIEWS

A journalistic view of life in Venezuela under the Hugo Chávez regime.

"An eagle does not hunt flies," Chávez once remarked by way of refusing to debate a challenger for the Venezuelan presidency. That, according to former Guardian Latin American bureau chief Carroll, is one of el presidente's terser comments. Indeed, a constant of life in the South American nation is Chávez's seemingly unbroken presence on TV, "every day for hours at a time, invariably live, with no script or teleprompter, mulling, musing, deciding, ordering." Other leaders, particularly of a totalitarian bent, have made masterful use of the media, but few with Chávez's devotion to the practice. Moreover, as if from the pages of Machiavelli, Chávez has layered himself in swaths of bureaucracy on the principle, it seems, that buying loyalty by way of jobs is a good way to win votes. Carroll is not an admirer, at least not an uncritical one, but he acknowledges Chávez's well-tuned political skills; even if the elections are carefully engineered, Chávez is, after all, democratically elected. On first coming into office, he also amended the constitution to extend human rights guarantees, protect the environment and give a host of benefits to working people—along, as it happens, with increasing the power of the president and the length of the term. Where Chávez, a cross between Simón Bolívar and Fidel Castro, is brought up at all in the American media, it is usually as a bogeyman, so the author's evenhanded view is welcome.

"Utopia is realizable," insists Chávez. It may not have arrived yet in Venezuela, but it's interesting to watch from afar. Carroll provides a useful primer on a little-known regime.