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Rio Penitente: A Novel of Expiation, David Peter Haugen, Black Kettle Books, 2013, , . On the brink of fifty, Robert Gattling runs away to Mexico in a custom Mercedes motor home, searching for something he can't define. After a harrowingly close call on a narrow bridge, he encounters two itinerant Mexican teenagers—violent, belligerent Berto and naïve village girl Conchita—who become Gattling's reluctant wards, traveling companions, and partners in a scheme that the American concocts in an effort to finally rid himself of guilt that has plagued him throughout his extraordinarily fortunate life. Twice divorced, having succeeded at and abandoned two careers—the second of which made him rich—Gattling has never been able to forgive himself his transgressions, to see himself as having given more than he's taken. The ghost of a homeless prowler who died twenty years ago, victim of an accidental blast from Robert's shotgun, rides along wherever the traveler goes. Fearing that he'll become just another aged Berkeley crank, Gattling flees his hillside house, with its expansive view across the San Francisco Bay, and his comfortable Bay Area life. He also leaves a lover, the pixyish real estate agent Mardi, denying himself the privilege of returning her heartfelt affection. But his problems with women and sex, like his guilt, follow him along the roads of Mexico. Even after he finds Selina—a mature and serene beauty with whom he can imagine building a new life—he cannot extract himself from entanglements old and new. Back in California, Gattling and the young Mexicans—along with mellow Don Luis, a wizened wanderer from Costa Rica—restore a grand old Los Angeles house for sale, a project aimed at establishing the immigrants in business. But despite Gattling's admirable intentions, the house becomes a bizarre ménage, a dysfunctional polygamous family in which three women vie, with a remarkable degree of civility, for his favor while the twitchy, resentful Berto—ever primed to attack—prowls the periphery. In Rio Penitente, author Angus Brownfield has crafted a compelling, cerebral modern novel with elements of both the picaresque and the potboiler. disaster..

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