

The writer who says that defeat also deserves to be talked about



David Toscana, winner of the 2026 Alfaguara Novel Prize, explains why literature should give voice to the people that history tends to forget.

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Courtesy

For Mexican writer **David Toscana**, a good novel begins by writing not about the victors but about those who lost the war, were forgotten, or never had the chance to tell their story.

His novel *El ejército ciego* (*The Blind Army*), which won the **2026 Alfaguara Novel Prize**, is based on an event that occurred in 1014 when the Bulgarian army was defeated by the Byzantine Empire's forces.

According to historical accounts, the Byzantines took approximately **15,000 soldiers prisoner** and ordered them to be blinded, leaving one soldier out of every hundred with one eye to guide the others back.

*"I searched high and low to find out what happened to those **blind soldiers**, but I never found out," Toscana recalled. Later, a Polish historian helped him begin the novel by pointing out that uncovering the fate of these soldiers was the **job of a novelist, not a historian**.*

He accepted the challenge and set out to write the novel. However, as he began writing, the author realized why no one had ever attempted to provide a realistic account of what happened afterward.

David Toscana, winner of the 2026 Alfaguara Novel Prize, will present *El ejército ciego* at the 2026 Monterrey International Book Fair. Photo: Courtesy of David Toscana



The legend of the 15,000 blind soldiers

In *El ejército ciego*, the **Tec graduate** of the Industrial and Systems Engineering program uses his imagination to recreate the stories of thousands of soldiers who have been silenced by history.

His proposal is based on the belief that **literature should explore what has not been told**, not repeat what is already known.

*“A novel that everyone reads the same way **isn’t a good novel**,”* the Monterrey-born author said in an interview with [CONECTA](#).

Toscana recounts that **Tsar Samuel of Bulgaria** died of shock when he saw his army arrive in such a state. And that is the end of the story, as we know it.

*“It was a sad story with **15,000 characters you don’t know what to do with**,”* he explained.

For this reason, he chose to deviate from a strict historical reconstruction and write what he calls **“the legend of the blind.”**

This approach enabled him to incorporate imagination, exaggeration, humor, and evolving versions as stories are passed from person to person, much like in the *children’s game of telephone*.

*“It’s not a **historical novel**. It’s set against a historical backdrop and based on a real event. From there, I wrote the legend of the blind,”* he explained.

“If everyone reads a novel the same way, it isn’t a good novel.”

Literature begins with words

According to Toscana, novels differ from other art forms because they are **constructed exclusively from words**.

He pointed out that, although these can be perceived through sight, hearing, or touch via the Braille system, they should not merely serve as **tools for communicating a story**.

*“Words must play a central role in what used to be called literature, one of the fine arts. It seems that literature is no longer considered **one of the fine arts**,”* he explained.

The author believes that **true literary value emerges when words have multiple meanings**, create irony, and suggest ideas that allow each reader to form their own interpretation.

*“A good novel can be interpreted in many different ways. Readers bring their own personal perspective, their memories, their way of seeing the world, and their **comparisons with other works they’ve read**,”* he said.

He added that this openness makes a story more **complex, rich, and artistic**.

Author David Toscana will participate in the 2026 Monterrey International Book Fair, which will take place October 10-18 at Cintermex. Photo: Courtesy of David Toscana



Turning our eye toward those who have suffered defeat

Many of Toscana’s characters are defeated, forgotten, or overwhelmed by circumstances that **push them to the margins**.

However, the writer believes that this interest is not unique to his novels but rather is part of a long literary tradition.

From *Les Misérables* and Russian novels to *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *Don Quixote*, literature often begins with a conflict that transforms the lives of its protagonists.

*“Life deals us many blows: through illness, infidelity, crime, and injustice. Literature has to deal with tragedy in order to perhaps reach a **happy ending, an open ending, or to leave the tragedy unresolved**,”* he explained.

In the author’s view, a novel should begin with a significant problem, though it does not have to end with the **death or destruction of its characters**.

In *El ejército ciego*, defeat is portrayed in a literal sense: a defeated and maimed army is condemned to return home and bear the **consequences of war**.

“A good novel can be interpreted in many different ways. Readers bring their own personal perspective and way of seeing the world to the text, as well as their own comparisons with other works they’ve read.”

History, literature, and the revenge of the vanquished

Toscana believes that although both **history and literature** can recount the experiences of those who lost, they do so in different ways.

He explained that official history tends to create heroic figures and self-sacrificing characters tied to national values. However, anti-war literature can depict the boredom, darkness, fear, and sense of meaninglessness experienced by those who participate in war.

“There’s no heroism there. It requires sacrifice, and it’s unlikely that the reader’s soul will feel enlightened,” he said.

According to Toscana, history is usually written by the victors. However, there are also numerous accounts written from the **perspective of the defeated**.

Examples of how the defeated can reclaim their voice include the memoirs of concentration camp survivors, accounts of the Armenian genocide, and novels about the Spanish Civil War.

The author believes that these stories can become a way to demand memory and force societies to confront the acts they would like to forget.

"History is where you get your revenge," he said.

An award to help reach more readers

After a career spanning more than three decades and having published works such as *Estación Tula*, *Santa María del Circo*, *El último lector*, *Olegaroy*, and *El peso de vivir en la tierra*, Toscana received the **2026 Alfaguara Novel Prize**.

The writer summed up what this recognition means to him, *"I think the most important thing is that the novel has a wide readership and is being published simultaneously in all **Spanish-speaking countries**, including the United States."*

"Writers' greatest desire is for their novel to be widely distributed and read," he said.

Despite the recognition he has received, Toscana avoids revisiting or judging his previous books.

"What authority does today's Toscana have to criticize the Toscana of 20 years ago?" he asked.

For this reason, he said he would rather not reread them or presume that he is a better writer now.

"Maybe I've become more conservative. Instead of improving a novel, I'd end up ruining it," he remarked with a **hint of humor**.

"Reading gives human beings dignity"

Toscana believes that literature not only entertains but also strengthens people's ability to express themselves, think critically, and defend themselves against misleading rhetoric.

"When people don't read and are handed a microphone, they're just unable to form a coherent sentence," he said.

According to the author, reading also influences memory, discernment, freedom, and what is commonly referred to as critical thinking.

"Reading gives human beings dignity. We've progressed from ignorance to knowledge. The more our brains develop, the more our concept of freedom evolves," he said.

Literature also enables us to engage in conversations with authors from different eras.

Toscana recalled Carlos Fuentes's reflection that reading had allowed him to have "wonderful conversations with himself."

*"The best way to engage with the past and with people who think much more deeply than we **do is through literature,**"* he said.

For David Toscana, a good novel does more than just tell a story. It also invites readers to interpret it based on their own experience and to engage with the words. Photo: Courtesy of David Toscana



Are we reading more, or are we just buying more books?

Toscana acknowledges that publishers are reporting an **increase in book sales**. However, they question whether this data means that there are more readers or that people are reading more.

One of his **main concerns** is that many people look for books that are described as “easy to read.”

He also expressed regret over the fact that **some schools have reduced the number of classics in their curricula**, opting instead for simpler texts.

*“It’s not about looking for something difficult. Rather, **it’s about finding a book that sparks conversation and reflection**, a book that makes us pause, underline passages, and question what the main character said,”* he explained.

He also pointed out that reading currently competes with a wider range of entertainment options.

*“In the past, when you got on the subway, you’d see a lot of people reading.” **“Now, almost everyone is on TikTok,”*** he said.

He added that the short-form nature of social media can simplify the way we think since it is difficult to adequately develop ideas in just a few characters.

“Philosophers can’t express their ideas in 140 characters,” he said.

“It’s not about looking for something difficult. Rather, it’s about finding a book that sparks conversation and reflection, a book that makes us pause, underline passages, and question what the main character said.”

Returning to Monterrey and meeting his readers

Although Toscana left **Monterrey in 2008**, he still has a close relationship with his hometown.

For him, returning means **reconnecting with friends and family** who still live in the city, enjoying the local cuisine, and talking with longtime readers.

The writer particularly fondly remembers his first appearance at the Monterrey International Book Fair, where he shared a panel with **Guillermo Fadanelli**.

He also remembers the first edition, held in a parking lot near the **Estadio Tecnológico**, which he attended as a member of the audience.

The 64-year-old author has watched the fair grow over the years and has seen publishers, authors, and journalists from different parts of the country attend.

A book fair where you can discover more books For the city of Monterrey, which has historically had few bookstores, FIL Monterrey has played a significant role.

“The Monterrey Book Fair offers a much wider selection of books than is available throughout the year,” he said.

This event brings together **major publishing houses, showcases new releases,** and invites writers from other cities and countries.

He also pointed out the attention it receives from local and national media and its reader-focused approach.

In this edition, Toscana will present *El ejército ciego* and will meet with readers who have followed his career since his early novels.

David Toscana participated in the 2024 Monterrey International Book Fair, delivering the opening address. Photo: Courtesy of David Toscana



The 2026 Alfaguara Prize

The winner of the **2026 Alfaguara Novel Prize** receives \$175,000 and a sculpture by Martín Chirino.

Its jury is chaired by Mexican writer Jorge Volpi, winner of the 2018 Alfaguara Novel Prize for *Una novela criminal*, and also comprises the following:

§ Agustina Bazterrica, an Argentine writer.

§ Brenda Navarro, a Mexican writer.

§ Camila Enrich, talent scout and cultural programmer.

§ Óscar López, journalist and director of the program *Página Dos* on RTVE's La 2.

§ Pilar Reyes, editorial director of Alfaguara.

FIL Monterrey 2026

The 2026 **Monterrey International Book Fair** will take place from October 10 to 18 at Cintermex.

For nine days, authors, scientists, artists, journalists, researchers, educators, and readers will come together to share their ideas and perspectives on literature, science, the humanities, art, education, technology, and major contemporary issues.

This year, **El Colegio Nacional** is participating as the guest of honor. The program will feature book presentations, lectures, panel discussions, and cultural activities.

This year's event will feature **David Toscana and other national and international figures**. Check out the full schedule of activities to see the dates and times of their participation.

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