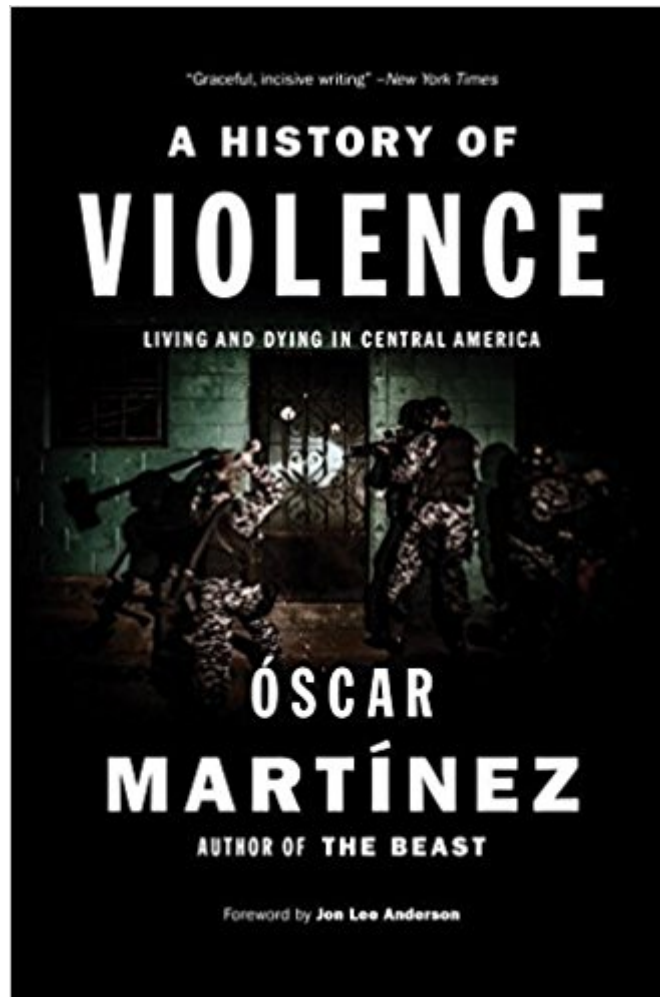


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A History Of Violence: Living And Dying In Central America



Synopsis

This is a book about one of the deadliest places in the world El Salvador and Honduras have had the highest homicide rates in the world over the past ten years, with Guatemala close behind. Every day more than 1,000 people—men, women, and children—flee these three countries for North America. Áscar Martínez, author of *The Beast*, named one of the best books of the year by the Economist, Mother Jones, and the Financial Times, fleshes out these stark figures with true stories, producing a jarringly beautiful and immersive account of life in deadly locations. Martínez travels to Nicaraguan fishing towns, southern Mexican brothels where Central American women are trafficked, isolated Guatemalan jungle villages, and crime-ridden Salvadoran slums. With his precise and empathetic reporting, he explores the underbelly of these troubled places. He goes undercover to drink with narcos, accompanies police patrols, rides in trafficking boats and hides out with a gang informer. The result is an unforgettable portrait of a region of fear and a subtle analysis of the North American roots and reach of the crisis, helping to explain why this history of violence should matter to all of us.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a major fan of Oscar Martinez's journalism I was simply counting the days for this books release once I got my hands on it I cracked the book open and I began yet another literary journey into the darkness that has engulfed Central America. The book for those of you who haven't read it is most definitely not for the faint of heart lot's of depiction of violent crimes such as homicides. At times I

often found myself setting the book down in order to not lose my full faith in humanity but my faith however remained thanks to journalistic heroism of Oscar Martinez who constantly puts his own life at risk while covering events in Latin America. One of the most striking aspects of this particular book is that Oscar Martinez decided to center part of the book that takes place in his native El Salvador around a single individual known as El Niño o Hollywood or El Kid Hollywood. Quite possibly one of the most interesting real life characters in modern literary history a notorious Mara Salvatrucha hitman turned state's witness for the government who often describes his claimed murders in a casual manner. I never thought that I could feel for someone as malevolent as this cat but thanks to Oscar Martinez immersive writing I found myself empathizing to a certain degree with The Kid. All in all this book is an excellent depiction of crime, destruction, and the corruption of both human nature and the state. Long live Oscar Martinez!!

Tips for Taking on this Book

1. Read *The Beast* by Oscar Martinez first it's technically the spiritual predecessor of this book. The book will also allow you to get used to Oscar Martinez writing style which is an immersive one and immediately places the reader into the action taking place. After which Oscar Martinez gives the reader some background over the situation at hand as the chapter continues.
2. Brush up on your Central American Geography the book includes a map of Central American countries and the states that compose them. I find that it would have been super helpful if the publisher had placed the exact geographic of all of the cities that are depicted in the book. It also would have been helpful if the publisher had also managed to republish the map found in *The Beast* over all of the existing criminal organizations found in these countries and their respective territories of operation.
3. Highly recommend this book to anyone who's into Criminal Justice or human migration patterns. Also if you are a fan of *The Wire* or any other cerebral cop shows you'll probably enjoy the hell out of this book. Oscar Martinez's writing is similar to that of David Simon's and Ed Burns writing on the show in which you are usually thrust into the action and are given background as the episode ensues.

There are problems with this book, but the force of its stories overwhelms them. Each chapter is a horror story about life amidst constant violence in Central America (ex-Costa Rica, Belize & Panama) in the 21st century. (Problem 1: it's not a "history" of violence, but all current events journalism). In fact, the word "violence", which has been cheapened in our time by the "social justice" community's use of it as a synonym for "offense", doesn't capture the bloodcurdling acts recounted by the unflinching author; the torture and killings in this book are ISIS-level terror, including gang rape, mass murders, slavery and a man beheading his wife. The first few chapters tell a more conventional narrative of a drug gang member betraying the gang leader, but, in the next

section, beginning with a magnificently written chapter on a (actually the sole) forensic investigator in El Salvador trying to exhume and identify murder victims at the bottom of wells, the accounts become more macabre and the victims more innocent. This is such a powerful book, I could not grade it less than 5 stars, despite its flaws. Quickly noting those: in his foreword, the author stresses a claim that the violence in Central America is caused by / originated in the US in various ways, as if this is what the book is going to demonstrate. Yet it never does nor does it even attempt to. Further, the last half of the book is badly edited. Too often, people or events previously recounted in detail, such as "El Niño", the state's witness at the center of the early chapters, is re-introduced in later chapters as if he were a new character. Similarly, some of the murders of migrants are narrated in multiple chapters, each time as if the other account did not exist within the same book. Still, those glitches pale in comparison to the impact of the narratives in the book and I cannot downgrade it for those reasons, as I might a book about a different topic. A very, very powerful book.

***I received an electronic galley of this book from the publisher through netgalley.com in exchange for an unbiased review. The opinions expressed are my own. In *A History of Violence*, Oscar Martinez promises us a story about the cruelty of the drug trade in Central America and how the United States has played a key role in its development and continuation. In 240+ pages, Martinez succeeds at the first task with astounding success through a series of vignettes with people at all different levels of the drug cartel from the bosses to the coyotes and interviews with government officials who try to fight the trade, even as the legal system makes it difficult. Absent a brief mention here or there, the United States hardly factors into the discussion although our policies certainly do merit quite a bit of discussion. This book didn't have nearly enough. One could consider this two different books. On the score of highlighting the brutality of the Central America, it's a five star read, but on the United States government portion, I'd be generous in giving it two stars.

This was an interesting book as it was written by a journalist with direct access to everyday people who've been victimized by cartels and gangs. It's depressing to realize that no depravity or violence is off limits to these monsters who willingly brutalize people in the name of money. And there are no easy solutions as corruption runs deep at every level of the government in these countries, causing the innocent to suffer. I hope Mr. Martinez will continue to expose the truth. I will check out his other book, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*.

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