"This profound book traces the history of Guatemala's thirty-six-year internal struggle through personal interviews that recount the heartwrenching stories of plantation owners, army officials, guerrillas, and the wretchedly poor peasants stuck in the middle. Both easy to read and compelling . . . Powerful subject matter." — Publishers Weekly

"Reads like a novel, narrated by a disarmingly funny, perceptive, deeply humane young American who knows how to wear his courage lightly . . . A brilliant and important book." — Francisco Goldman, author of The Long Night of White Chickens

Introduction

Guatemala's thirty-six-year internal war was one of the most brutal in the history of the Western Hemisphere, leaving more than 200,000 dead or "disappeared" and shattering the lives and livelihoods of those left behind. In Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala, Daniel Wilkinson tells for the first time the stories of those who lived through this devastating period in Guatemalan history. Wilkinson paints a powerful portrait, not only of the effects of state-sponsored terror but of the courage and determination shown by those who overcame their fear to tell their tales and continue living in the most horrifying circumstances.
Silence on the Mountain begins in the early 1990s during Wilkinson's first visit to Guatemala, when he became fascinated by, and soon started investigating, the arson of a coffee plantation's manor house by a group of guerrillas. What he found when he started asking questions of the plantation's workers and neighbors, however, was a tangled web of suspicion, fear, and silence, instilled by years of harrowing government terrorism. The story behind the arson soon became emblematic of the panic and mystery that enveloped the entire country for more than three decades.

Over the course of the next several years, Wilkinson was able to gain the trust of Guatemalans across the political and sociological spectrum, including massacre survivors, rebel fighters, peasants on the coffee farms, European settlers, and former members of the U.S.-backed military government. Their stories range from the terrifying (the army's massacre of an entire village suspected of collaborating with rebel guerrillas) to the almost comically ironic (a former defense minister who went on to earn a degree from Harvard, despite receiving a summons at his graduation for a civil suit filed by relatives of indigenous citizens tortured and killed by his army) to the inspiring (a plantation bookkeeper's son who has devoted his life to reforming conditions on the country's coffee plantations).

Weaving these and other tales together into a rich narrative tapestry, Wilkinson gives us an affecting depiction of Guatemala's largely unreported recent history, a history that is inextricably bound to the actions of the United States. It was the CIA's 1954 coup against President Jacobo Arbenz that led to the civil war, and continued U.S. support of repressive military regimes over the following decades has profoundly shaped all aspects of Guatemalan society.

Silence on the Mountain examines the country's past through the sad and fascinating stories of both the military officers whose brutality was excused in the name of anticommunism and the indigenous workers whose lives were yoked to the American and European demand for coffee. Wilkinson traces the cycle of exploitation, greed, and growing dependence on foreign economies that fed into what became Central America's longest-running and most dramatic conflict. It is a story that continues to play itself out today in other Third World countries around the globe.

Wilkinson also delves into the work of the internationally sponsored truth commission, which has collected testimony from thousands of people across Guatemala in the hope of exposing and prosecuting those responsible for some of the worst atrocities. The commission is just one part of a global human rights movement — "perhaps the only good to come of the dirty wars in Latin America," Wilkinson writes — which has helped to publicize human rights abuses in Guatemala and elsewhere, making it more difficult to hide the costs of political repression. This movement is helped incalculably by those brave survivors who have come forward to tell of their experiences. Many of these stories from Guatemala are told for the first time by Wilkinson in Silence on the Mountain.

What emerges, then, is a chronicle of fear and horror but also of survival and heroism — the heroism of everyday people living in the shadow of great terror and, often, the looming threat of death. Although peace accords were signed in Guatemala in 1996, danger lingers today in a country where mass graves continue to be unearthed, human rights workers live with threats to their safety, and violent crime is again on the rise.

Part detective story, part reporter's journey, and completely gripping and original, Silence on the
Mountain is a powerful and important work that sheds light on one of this century's most brutal and underreported conflicts while celebrating the beauty and resilience of Guatemala and its people.

A conversation with Daniel Wilkinson about Silence on the Mountain

Q) How did you decide to write this book?

A) I went to Guatemala after college to work on my Spanish. I planned to be there just a few months, but then I began hearing stories about the country's civil war — stories of killing on a scale that to me seemed incomprehensible. What was so remarkable wasn't just the war's brutality, but the extent to which it had been ignored by the rest of the world. The Guatemalans telling these stories had been struggling for years to get them told abroad. Tell about the violence in order to stop it — that was the idea. It seemed like a noble cause, something worth contributing to. So I stayed.

Q) And this book was your way of helping locals get their stories told abroad?

A) That was the initial impulse, what got me started. As luck would have it, I stumbled upon an unusual opportunity to gather stories in a place where no one had before — a coffee plantation. Coffee was the backbone of the country's economy, and the plantations were where much of the war had played out, so it seemed like a good place to go to understand what the violence had been about. The problem was that when I got there, no one wanted to talk to me about the war. They said it hadn't affected the region. And I might have believed them, too, except I knew that the guerrillas had torched the house of the plantation's owner, and I knew that wouldn't have happened unless there was other stuff going on in the area. So I began to wonder: what secrets were these people hiding, and why were they hiding them? That was the mystery I set out to solve. The book is my account of what it took to do so.

Q) So what secrets were the people hiding?

A) You'll have to read the book to find out. But you can probably guess already why they were hiding them. They were terrified. That may seem like an obvious answer, but it wasn't so clear when I began. The worst years of the war were long past, and it seemed to me — as well as to my Guatemalan friends — that there was no longer any reason to be scared of talking about the past. What's more, the people on the plantation masked their fear so well that I had trouble recognizing it. It wasn't the sort of thing I had known growing up in the United States, or been taught about in my history classes, or even come across in books or movies or on TV. The kind of fear they felt was completely foreign to me.

Q) Why did you write in the form of a personal narrative?
A) It seemed to be the only way I could get at the central topic of the book, which is state-sponsored terror. People write about terror all the time, but they almost never actually tell you what it is. Instead they focus on specific acts of violence, they provide body counts. Terror is different from other types of violence in that its principal target usually is not the person killed but the ones who survive. Its aim is to instill an intense and overwhelming fear among the surviving population. But how do you measure fear? How do you explain its impact on people's lives? Most forms of nonfiction writing aren't well equipped to do so. You need to either get inside people's heads or find a way to gauge what's going on inside by looking at how they interact with the world around them. And that's much easier to do through an extended narrative.

Q) And why a personal narrative?

A) Originally I wanted to keep myself out of the picture. But the stories people were telling me were simply too incomplete, too contradictory, to stand alone. Besides, what was most interesting about a lot of them was the context in which they got told. I realized that I couldn't really tell these stories without telling my own. As it turned out, writing in the first person also allowed me to explore some issues I wouldn't have been able to otherwise — for example, how terror creates a climate of uncertainty. I was able to use my own effort to grapple with uncertainty in the face of danger to get at this issue.

Q) So you use your own experience to stand in for the experience of Guatemalans?

A) Not exactly. I describe how the climate of fear affected me in order to help readers imagine better how it may have affected Guatemalans. But my own experience is clearly very different from that of the people there. I ended up running some risks, but nothing on the scale of what the locals had been through. The biggest difference between me and them, of course, was that I could always leave the country. Which is part of the reason I felt compelled to stay, even when things got a little rough.

Q) What does the "betrayal" in the subtitle refer to?

A) The book is full of betrayals. One is the generic sort that you find whenever you look at how people live through historical upheavals at the local level — within a community, a workplace, or even a family — where broader shifts in relations of power are often experienced as personal betrayals. This becomes all the more pronounced when people start getting killed. People renounce all the allegiances that could possibly make them targets of the violence. They come to feel betrayed by the leaders who got them into trouble, and these leaders in turn feel betrayed by the people who abandon them. And it's not just a matter of leaders — anyone who tries to defy the dangers only increases the risks for everyone else. As you'll see in the book, there were moments when I felt that I myself might be betraying the trust of the people who were telling me their stories.

Q) Terror, betrayal, forgetting . . . it all sounds pretty grim. Was there anything positive to be found in the history you uncovered?

A) Absolutely. And these were the secrets that were being kept on the plantation. Again I'll save the details for the book, but basically they had to do with efforts people had undertaken to make their world a more humane and democratic place. That may sound romantic, but these efforts
were in fact characterized by an idealism of a very romantic sort. These people's methods may have been misguided at times, and in some cases even morally repugnant. Still, one of the most compelling aspects of Guatemalan history is the way successive generations were willing to pursue these ideals in the face of staggering personal risk. And actually, one way to understand the violence in Guatemala is to see it as an effort by the state to turn these past struggles into unspeakable secrets and keep them that way so long so that they will eventually be forgotten.

Q) Why should American readers care about what you found in Guatemala?

A) Guatemalan history offers a powerful cautionary tale for us as we confront the two big international issues of our day: globalization and the war on terrorism. The public debate over globalization has tended to be pretty simplistic and ahistorical, with little attention to what has taken place in countries like Guatemala that have struggled for years on the underside of the global economy. On one side of the debate you have the "free trade" camp that advocates increased economic integration through trade as the best way to lift countries like Guatemala out of poverty. Yet as the book shows, globalization in this sense is nothing new to Guatemala. On the other side of the debate you have the "anti-globalization" crowd, whose arguments — at least the more simplistic ones that get the air time — tend to disregard the many ways in which globalization can benefit marginalized groups in poor countries. The book looks at how "globalization" has reshaped Guatemala over the last century. It's not a pretty picture, but I think it's more balanced than most of what's out there.

Q) And what about the war on terrorism?

A) In the months after 9/11 there was endless talk here about all the things we needed to do to keep the terrorists from winning. Well, Guatemala was one of the places where, in the twentieth century, terror did in fact win. Unfortunately, as the book shows, the U.S. government played a major role in allowing that to happen, by creating and supporting an abusive military regime and undermining the efforts of rights advocates to publicize its abuses. People in successive administrations did this, because at the time they thought it was the best way to fight the cold war in the region. But now we're in a different sort of war. The new enemy is defined by its methods, not its ideology. So, in theory at least, we should be ready to oppose the use of terror by any group, whether or not its members share our politics. When the United States chooses instead to tolerate or even support abusive allies, it's the people on the ground who pay the price. Guatemala shows us what a terrible price that can be.