



Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of America

Charles Bowden

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In this ground-shaking, breath-taking cri de coeur, Bowden delves with love-driven fury for the roots of our brutal history in this once-brave New World. The figures he casts before us—from Pancho Villa to a modern-day drug lord, from General Sherman to a skid-row Sioux named Robert Sundance—trace a story not so much of rapaciousness as of fear and loathing. Bowden twines it with the natural history of the hammer orchid, a carnivore whose deceptive delicacy comes to stand for the terror and hypocrisy that have perverted our love of the land, its peoples, and our very natures.

Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of America Details

Date : Published February 1st 2002 by Farrar Straus Giroux (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9780865476295

Author : Charles Bowden

Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Westerns, Travel

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From Reader Review Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of America for online ebook

Graham says

Tricky one to get a bead on. Bowden's an interesting enough character in that he often seems wholly unlikable in a sort of hyper-macho libertarian fashion, but other times somewhat less of a caricature (especially when the guard is let down). His is a highly stylized approach, one in which the quotability of nearly every sentence can be both engrossing (in a Barthes-ian textual pleasure sorta way) and frustrating (in a Nietzschean epigram sorta way, possessed of its own cleverness to an extent detrimental to the overall narrative). The overall body of the text meanders as much as Bowden himself, but manages to orbit around central concepts with an obliqueness that actually renders them far more readable than something more didactic. "Blood Orchid" exists as a cloud of ideask imperfect but exhilarating.

Jordy says

Viva la Bowden and RIP

Quel says

This should be required reading in schools

Jamie says

When there's one name I hear from Rick Bass, and Ed Abbey, and Elmore Leonard, and Harry Crews— I listen. No, scratch that. I can't get it in my hands fast enough. Goddamn, they were right: Charles Bowden.

He says, "I speak for the mongrel, the mestizo, the half-breed, the bastard, the alley cat, the cur, the hybrid, the mule, the whore, the unforeseen strain that pounds against all the safe and disgusting doors. I speak for vitality, rough edges, torn fences, broken walls, wild rivers, sweat-soaked sheets. Who would want a world left mumbling to itself, a perfect garden with the dreaded outside, the fabled Other held at bay and the neat rows of cultures and genes safe behind some hedgerow? I dread a world that is all Iceland, the people fair, their genealogies stretching back in a dull column for a millennium, their folkways and mores and lifeways and deathways all smug and pointless. I speak for graffiti. Look there is Christopher, watch the son-of-a-bitch, watch'm, he's got a spray can of paint and look what he's writing on that temple wall..."

He says, "I'm proud to live in a nation without serious censorship. It is not necessary. We have all been trained. We don't have anything to forget because we have remembered very little."

He says, "I am keen about the dangers. Not out of fear but out of dread. The way I see it there are so many ways to fail and those failures are very difficult to see coming because they are all named success."

He says, "What have I learned? That the land is good, bad, and indifferent but this never matters because it is all we have or ever can have."

He says, "True, we could have done better— but then everything is like a love affair, everything could have been done better. But the mess we lament, that is the thing that a part of me celebrates."

He says, "He began to cause trouble." He says, "This is where I grew very fond of him: he caused trouble."

The only thing is, I'm already notching his others on my belt and I think I'm going to find ones that surpass it.

Dan says

i first learned about bowden while listening to an appearance on *democracy now!*, where he was talking about the drug cartel culture of juarez, and how it relates to the u.s.'s idiotic "war on drugs" and draconian immigration policies. accordingly, i approached *blood orchid* expecting the insights of a cantankerous leftist along the lines of mike davis. that's not what i got.

to begin with, *blood orchid* isn't really about much of anything. there's plenty of potential for interesting insights, particularly when bowden encounters the troubled grandson of the man who turned in sitting bull (!!!). but these characters emerge as mere allegories for his predictable breed of pseudo-beatnik, baby-boomer fatalism. this is one of those *rum diary* type books - where a white alcoholic retreats to some exotic latin american locale where whiskey, whores and manly existentialism are meant to heroically unveil the hypocritical veneer of polite society.

each and every female character fucks the author - sometimes for a price, sometimes not - and bowden's descriptions of luscious brown flesh are inevitably followed by a sentence or two about how he saw deep sadness in her eyes before he paid her to fuck him (or whatever). and the flesh is *always* brown, too. throughout the book, bowden upholds a shallow dichotomy between the false sophistication of the north versus the sensual tragedy of the south. his sympathy for native americans, for example, occasionally veers off into jim-morrison-on-peyote territory. beyond its troublesome identity politics (a phrase bowden would no doubt resent, as a bearer of tragic eternal truths), *blood orchid* resorts to self-loathing rants about the dying soul of american culture - complete with aimless anti-establishment-isms, bob dylan quotations and sexualized descriptions of flowers and wasps.

i might have fallen for this sort of thing when i was 18 and wanted nothing more than to kerouac my way across the country on a highway to hell. but at 34, *blood orchid* reads like a mean-spirited impersonation of cormac mc carthy at his worst. a major disappointment.

Jay says

I definitely put Charles Bowden right up there with my creative non-fiction heroes: Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson. He 19s developed his own style that takes us deeper, farther into a Mexico that we are so, so close to and will never understand. I mean, come on 13 the violence is here. We read about the body count in Tijuana and the spillover into San Diego, but Bowden has the talent to put a face on it.

Blood Orchid is less about flowers, but a lot more about violence. Like the carnivore Orchid that devours its victims, the history of Mexico, too, has maintained a lust for exploitation. I like how Bowden shows the killers the night before they get married, the horses before they get plowed on the highway, and of course, the prostitute who proudly shows you pictures of her new furniture before she sucks you off. Bowden interlaces stories and characters of the old way and the the new frontier. He stuns us with inside information and scares us with intimate detail. His Mexico is something that is missing from today 19s headlines. The faces behind the stories.

Salt344 says

A bleak meditation on the darkness of human nature and how it played out in the American west and how it plays out today in the world at large. The book ranges from the destruction of the buffalo to the Phoenix program in Vietnam and the Disappeared of Argentina. It's strong stuff and it's overall tone reminded me of No Country for Old Men and Blood Meridian. It's a tough read but very thought provoking.

Graham says

In his acknowledgments, Scott Carrier called Bowden the best American non-fiction writer working today. I noticed Bowden recently wrote something in National Geographic about the new wall being put up along the U.S. Mexico Border.

That said, I found his work repulsive. He stumbles past earnest and winds up merely projecting his own appetites and dysfunctions onto the places and people he visits. The tone is detached, angry, brooding.

He processes only those observations that confirm his diseased inner state rather than allow his readers to access any of the struggles and doubts that might make him or the world seem more human. It's cowardly, self deluding bullshit. "I am drunk and manly, so I see through it all, I identify with sitting bull who told the world to fuck off, let me tell you about what sitting bull said, it was so cool."

He throws in vignettes on natural selection, stephen jay gould type of stuff about hammer orchids and wasps, deliberately sexed up yet still dull.

Jim says

3.5 stars

I have ambivalent feelings about this book, so it's hard for me to rate it. It's a book-length series of interrelated stream of consciousness rants on the rape of the environment and the destruction of Native American people and their culture by our forefathers, continuing into present times. It's also a meditation on the violent history of the land and peoples along the U.S./Mexican border. Bowden is a talented writer, and I agree with much of what he says, yet it's a bitter pill to swallow.

He has an interesting take on the war on drugs. He thinks that it's mostly a show. His reasoning is that Mexico is so dependent on narco-dollars that the Mexican economy would collapse if Uncle Sam shut down drug-smuggling, sending an unstoppable surge of desperate Mexicans flooding across the border. Is this the alcohol-fueled ravings of a madman? I don't know. He also thinks we live in a dead culture, referring to the dominant culture/mindset that spawned the settling and development of this country, and the expansion, influence, and dominance of American interests on the world stage. On one hand, I respect his talent and point of view. On the other hand, his writing seems to be self-indulgent at times, as though he enjoys wallowing in the mess that is modern (post-modern?) America. He seems to be driving blind down an endless highway with a crash and burn mentality.

Charles says

Read this. Then read the next one, *Blues for Cannibals*, and finish up with the last of the loose trilogy, *Some of the Dead are Still Breathing*. When it's all over you will have probed the depths of human depravity and greed, all of it true, yet will come through it all holding a small but bright diamond of hope in your hand.

A.E. Reiff says

Begin the Bowdeen

Just when you think Bowdeen has gone off the rails to the Seminary of the Damned you realize he is talking about the history of the unthinkable from Ancient Mayan to Argentina to Vietnam. Of ten million natives dead of smallpox and a hundred million buffalo removed. You try to put that up and get a bad connection. How can his genre be called nonfiction when in the midst of charging the gold statue of sacrifice they are running the corridors of the Pentagon to retrieve their files, the farmers from Hanford, Washington with their gold tumors, the one breasted women from Utah, uranium miners wheezing, squads of wolves and mountain lions to discover what happened to the forests, glowing radioactive tortoises, mobs of shoeless Mexicans, dolphins and orcas with embedded radio collars each lunging for their files where their lives are buried alive? He brings those responsible to the bar. Run by Uncle of course, so-called, and Christopher Hitchens of Oxford, Harvard men also, graduates bludgeon into consciousness the minds of the sodden. Read all in reverse. Bowdeen takes us to where flesh and blood scent moral outrage. Liberals and puritans in the seminary of hell? This public service brought to you, hosed in paragraphs over tourists in writing.

The only difference between Bowden exposing the MX test sites, the folders of the Cabeza Prieta gunnery ranges, the killings of the wastelands and the hundreds of websites on everything from the poles of Saturn to the depths of the Denver Airport are that millions read and believe those, but only hundreds read Bowden and believe or care. Even if he is one of those post-human voices you hear from for the last time: "I step over a dead secretary--her head apparently severed by a now serene one-breasted woman who is resting in an ergonomically designed chair--and walk down the corridor with the file" 229. No wonder there is gunfire and murder, prostitution and drug dealing throughout, it is all that is left. "We have all we need-except, ah except, we have no beliefs" (230). He shows it for what it is, no different from Micah flying over those "who also eat the flesh of My People, and flay their skin from them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the caldron" (3). The only ones who don't want Bowdeen to sound

the Bible are all the scientists, all of the secularists and all of the rest. But what goes around comes: "you shall not have a vision and it shall be dark to you that you shall not divine, and the sun shall go down on the prophets and the day shall be dark over head."

If you want to be a prophet be a loner, a writer be a brooder. Nobody knows the progress of the migrante like Chuck. It is the burden of Arizona to the barren, Bowden and Abby, not Goldwater, McCain and Keating, not the Mormons of Snowflake, the bears and elk of the White, pasture of wilderness, the rock sky. Get to the concrete, but you won't like it, cruelty of the milkweed human. Prophecy in the end is always about the human and what it means.

It must be a gift to excite such rancor and contempt in people half your age to judge you by their callow ways as they do the war torn Bowden, who don't want to hear the prophet, "the two groups I know who are most alike are environmentalists and pornographers," 95 pious and subpious as grammarians. The oldsters pay him no mind, don't read him at all. "I feel like I am escaping from a crypt." 92 Bowden is a lost Christopher Hitchens without a creed or a Way or junk energy from cigarettes and booze enough to kill him, it takes a dope, a revolutionary '68 whose revolt failed when the parakeet in the cage died, and then... "what went wrong with my life, my country, and my times?" xv

Bowden and Bowdeen

Looking for hopelessness in a hopeful world he finds Loren Eiseley's Star Thrower fin de siecle homily, "the last land tortoise had fallen victim to the new expressway. None of his kind any longer came to replace him. 78,89. Bowdeen wants apocalypse, wants to "piss into the fires of hell" but Heracles turned the rivers to clean his mess, not that Bowden hasn't been to desert or river, but that's why I like him, me for whom miracles happen and the tortoises amble down the street of our town looking for a mate. I ask Big Guy, all full grown and clean as glass of milk,--

"WE'VE BEEN IN A LONG WAR AND WE'VE LOST THAT WAR AND THE WAR HAS POISONED US AND OUR GROUND...IF WE ADMIT THESE FACTS, WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO SURVIVE. IF WE DON'T, IT REALLY WON'T MATTER BECAUSE WE WILL BE FUNCTIONALLY DEAD." xvi --
What, do you think your ideas even make sense to yourself?

I have the only full grown momma tortoise on at least the block, so bring him in, and he has lived so since, not in her arms when the small rain down Would rain, but near her den. Today he is following her, bobbing up and down and there is funny business of the 20 and the 70. This is to say if you don't like Bowdeen you must be too serious a sinner and should lighten up, for "we were too happy with the raw liver smeared against our lips to worry about the vanishing hoof prints" 5

THE BLOOD ORCHID IS THE ATOMIC BOMB, the greed, the labor of thousands in its making, the belief in government, the killing of the buffalo by the ten millions until the orchids turn from fibrous roots into cables of our being "the roots getting thicker by the year, the first fine lines like lace on the bark of our lives...then coarsening as more and more wealth and power and energy surges through [a living gasoline explosion-Dario] and at first the roots begin to look like snakes, then like cables and later like giant aqueducts, the hidden heart pounding to the beat of explosives." 8 **But in its truest essence the blood orchid is a metaphor of the post-human, which in short is the replacement of humanity by artificial intelligence.** Granted, when "biological" this hardly seems artificial, but it is the ultimately conscienceless pretense even while it assumes the moral high ground of its own self arrogation. So whether we speak of social networks or hybrid life forms all are ultimate goods to benefit the human, understanding that as the post-human. How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people? As Leonard Cohen says, all the important

mass murderers listened to the Beatles <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HJuJQI...> These destructions and extinctions Bowden witnesses are but tangled weaves and counter weaves of DARPA, to call it by just one arm of its tentacles.

That's why we have lost the war. Get over it! But the blooms of the blood orchids, image of America and its ways, are more fearsome, all consuming old and young, a narcotic unresisted, but as he says later of the Indian, maybe the hundred year drunk, our high, was the only way the old ways could have survived, for they were not assimilated, they were drunk and rejected and all the efforts to acclimatize their language away failed--because they were drunk. "They say the blood orchids cannot be removed, they say we have grown dependent upon them" 12...for centuries people have faced manifestations of the blood orchids, they have seen strange clouds, felt something seize their bodies they did not fully understand, died painful and surprising deaths. Felt the heel on their necks. And not given in or up." 14 So by the metaphor you know that maybe the survival of humanity is a drug-drunk century necessitated while the machines take over. Would it were so to have mastered the art of the anesthetic. Bowden perfectly predicts, blindly, the arrival of H+, "We had to kill the thing we love [ourselves, Humanity] to prove our love...We had to sacrifice our women to prove our love--so many one-breasted ones now ambling around as testimony to our adoration. Kill the thing we love. That is our central legend" 15.

The mutilation of earth, the mutilation of woman, the mutilation of health, nobody can say why fish have sores in the gulf, autism rates rocket, rocket is our favorite epithet, it all rockets, everything but the GNP, that rocket fell to earth, I knew not where so I made a list of it here, called it Pray It Not Strange, add to it often, links, back links, vids, arts, <http://humanbotany.blogspot.com/2011/...> Potheads among the gold, "We have achieved our Historical Absolute like good Doktor Hegel promised us so long ago. We have made our entire nation into a reservation" 17.

How to tell the minor prophets from the major, the body of work, the lyricism, the suffering. "And at the end of the rainbow, by God, there is pot" 18. He says pot but we read all the other emollients, dilutions of our six minds right up to the point where we believe we are no longer valuable or even that we are what we are. Pot like rockets. "We have the best orchid garden on the surface of the earth." If you're a major prophet they divide you into thirds. There is no deuterio Amos. Isaiah was sawed in two. It remains to saw in two the minor Bowden. "I now think that things are occurring so far beneath the daily patter of our civilization that we can both feel the tremors and at the same time ignore them. I think we are dying, and what we are dying from is from what we are" 85 "I am a provincial. I am incapable of sacrifice. I need to violate myself" 99,100. If you can't see it yourself, the culture of death, then see it in him, in Bowden, "I feel I am with the dead" 101 I can now look for a miracle." 102

All you need to be a prophet is the truth. Truth, inherently prophetic, shattering, "because Ephraim made altars to sin, altars shall be his sin" Hosea. Is there iniquity in Gilead? they sacrifice bullocks in Gilgal. "The sacrificers of men who made idols of their own understanding kiss the calves."

One thing you have to admire about Chuck, he lives in the midst where we all of us be dead, like Johan flailing up on the beach, Jonah, but I think he is Johan with a second breath, the two halves of Isaiah coming together in the resurrection, the three boys dancing in the furnace, these things go on and on. Among the prophets axeheads float and angels breathe in the face of Sennacherib. "I cannot tell if I am waiting for someone to kill me or waiting for someone to turn on the lights." 126 Bribed to say these things, to laud the unlaud, the details, dust, people, the story, the escritiores, each idol crushed.

Prophecy isn't in words it's in tropes, mystery plays and silent allegories, examples of being. He is a prophet in this sense, not a saint. He bears in his own body and mind the marks of our depravity and defeat at forces bigger than ourselves, not just sex and commercialism but greed and fear, those two most bestial nodes. "I

believe in the instant we forget we commit a sin" 110 He is a prophet like Hosea who marries a whore to mirror the unfaithful, like Ezekiel who ate dung, like Elecuria who says the poor are all prophets who mirror our poverty for us so no wonder we hate them and mistreat them. He is a prophet the way woman abused is prophetic of the earth abused everywhere. It is useful to know these people are even on the planet. "In that day one shall take up a parable against you with a doleful lamentation and say We be utterly spoiled." Micah

"Imagine the problem is not physical. Imagine the problem has never been physical, that it is not biodiversity...the whales, the loss of jobs...imagine that it goes deeper, right to the core of what we call our civilization...that our civilization, our governments are sick and that we are mentally ill and spiritually dead and that all our issues and crises are symptoms of this deeper sickness" 138-9.

"It is time to consider the inevitable: the rupture and collapse of the last empire, us" (234). There must be some branch of physics to explain a history where alternative states exist in the branching universe, string theory of possible selves in the billions. These result from all the choices made and not made. The not made lead to the not not made in the trillions, computer chips stored in the heel of the genome back to the stone. You thought it was the head, but it is the heel. Only immigration status, financial records, inconsequential bios are head bound. But that's the problem, the known. We take alternative histories with Bowdeen's unnatural history as speculative. Only the majority and minority views make the unchanging absolute. The physics of it is a hopeless fabrication of the endless universe, white wheelbarrow beside the red chickens. If history is Alice phantastes it is majority protocol too. Science does believe in the absolute, the majority view. All histories are not simultaneously true for the majority. This explains America, Bowdeen's unnatural war being lost along side the optimistic view that we can still win the war lost. Majority history is the best of all possible worlds censored for national security. Its platitudes deny the horror of its heart. History is this Trojan horse built to hide the greatest conspiracy at the hands of the unknown cause. Oh do not ask what it, Bowdeen takes us for a visit. Meanwhile eat Wheaties. I heard on Radio Zen rule # eight, appreciate diversity, but Whitehead and Russell, Albert North and Bertrand, said that DIVERSITY IS THE NEGATION OF IDENTITY (Principia Mathematica 216), so I went to the antique mall naked, walked among dealers, shoppers, fakers, and honest ones. Can you tell them apart as if they were alternative histories, all true, but not all good?

Like the cheek teeth of a lion (Joel) the prophet says what comes of the blessed Jerusalem and of the Chosen is its unnatural history. Our Jerusalem, a blessed American hope of the ages, of Whitman not Dario, America of Roosevelt, anti-politic, America of war on dogs, where governments tingle at the sound of money, is not for Bowden. Bowden walks miles at night in the desert past the blooming white cactus, caching water. Bowden drives at 105 out of Denver, races Hunter Thompson to the pueblos to take the oath. Maybelline and Jack, they want to get high. His compassion lies in the ditch with the wretched, upside down, fingers moving. Who knows but the words come out of the ground from some spring of Erebus, bitter water or clean, so clean it makes us see?

We have to tread lightly. There are many ways to offend. If we say Bowdeen is among minor prophets it is not just their names we spurn. Micah, Amos, Joel, Hosea, Bowdeen. None are Jonah either, lamenting the gourd with a sense of fun, swallowed here, puking there. It's what they say makes intolerable, not just in your face, but in your ear. Pray they do not get in your mind and turn you to Nineveh. "Therefore I will wail and come to America. Howl! I will go stripped and naked, for her wound is incurable" (Micah). Roll in the dust you who plan evil at night and practice it in the morning. All the graven images beaten to pieces, the high places of Judah - Jerusalem (Micah). Search out the mysteries of Esau, violence against brothers. Make you bald at the very Mount of Esau (Obadiah). They see Yah before the altar digging sheol. From the top of Carmel to the bottom of the sea, righteousness turns to hemlock for those who carry the star of Moloch.

Taken away on their backs with pruning hooks. Sell and buy the poor. The top of Carmel withering (Amos).
A famine of hearing where fats overflow the mind.

The takeaway after sleep is that we are of the earth. If you read this book you will get it. And earth is what we are, of the land, sea, sky and air. This should not need saying except that is the war we lost, among others, a connection to the land, which is ourselves, and to the women and children, who are ourselves. Just in time he says it, just before Google X, Square, Twitter, and Singularity universalize and monetize the human right out into orbit where they never touch earth again. And this is seen as enlightenment. Now go read History Wold <http://www.scribd.com/doc/83826992/Hi...>

Jonathan Thompson says

Oh, Chuck, what a voice you were, for the desert, the darkness, the downtrodden... Blood Orchid is not an easy read, for a number of reasons: It floats around in time and space in a disorienting way, and the words dwell on torture, self-destruction, despair, and the like. So make sure you're in a good place mentally and emotionally before delving in. Then go for it. It's a masterpiece.

Austin says

If you're looking for a cohesive narrative or linear thinking, Blood Orchid is not for you. If you've already had your fill of our country/society/culture and its corruption, systematic injustice, and institutional unfairness, then this book is not for you. If you have consonants and vowels in your name and like to keep a positive outlook on life, this book is not for you. So really, most likely, to be completely frank, this book is probably not for you. But it was for me.

Charles Bowden's non-fiction is kind of like if Leopold Bloom from Ulysses was a Native American veteran of Viet Nam who'd weathered decades of alcoholism and was dying of bone cancer. It's like reading a poem with four or five random threads woven together describing the death of our country's soul. And it all whirls around the metaphorical Blood Orchid and it's sexual behavior, which Bowden, at the beginning of each chapter, elaborates on as if reading from a scientific journal. The characters throughout the book, real people, are poor and destitute and riddled with desperation, including himself. There's no real way to describe this book accurately, from one person to another. You must experience it. If you dare. Try to find it at the library though, it's extremely rare and ridiculously expensive. And you might just hate it.

Although this took me quite a while to finish, it wasn't the book, I assure you. It was bad lifestyle choices on my part. The kind that make you gain 10 lbs. in a month and where you can't remember whether you sent that work email or not. Oh well, life's full of cycles. I'm back on track.

Mark says

Don't waste your time. Perhaps I don't have the patience for this one. I can not say for sure what made this as utterly unreadable as it was. Whatever the case it fell short of expectations, as misguided as they may have been.

Joe Brunory says

Definitely a book you have to read if you enjoy a strong voice. To me, this was the most amazing book of nonfiction that I've read since *In Cold Blood*. Masterful style, brilliant content, and challenging topics.
