



Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields

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Ciudad Juárez lies just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. A once-thriving border town, it now resembles a failed state. Infamously known as the place where women disappear, its murder rate exceeds that of Baghdad. Last year 1,607 people were killed—a number that is on pace to increase in 2009.

In *Murder City*, Charles Bowden—one of the few journalists who has spent extended periods of time in Juárez—has written an extraordinary account of what happens when a city disintegrates. Interweaving stories of its inhabitants—a raped beauty queen, a repentant hitman, a journalist fleeing for his life—with a broader meditation on the town's descent into anarchy, Bowden reveals how Juárez's culture of violence will not only worsen, but inevitably spread north.

Heartbreaking, disturbing, and unforgettable, *Murder City* establishes Bowden as one of our leading writers working at the height of his powers.

Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields Details

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From Reader Review Murder City: Ciudad Juárez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields for online ebook

Dora says

Harrowing and hair-raising investigative journalism in a city which lays waste to many who try to uncover its secrets.

Spoiler: although he's still alive, the author didn't escape Ciudad Juárez and probably never will. Something about his time there seems to have broken Bowden, but he was able to spin his despair into some top-notch reportage. Much of the book is taken up with the reporter's (rather more literary) version of screaming and tearing at his own face, and I agree with the many reviewers who've noted that the text falls apart in those places. So did I, a few times. Worth a read.

TL;DR - this book is well-researched and brutal; it's kind of disjointed, but not enough to suck.

Ana says

Here's the deal. We're gonna take us a ride. Now be quiet. Time's up, you gotta ride. We brought the duct tape—do you prefer gray or tan? No matter, get your ass in. We have the plastic bag, the loaded guns. You have been waiting? Everyone is waiting, but our list is so long. Everyone pretends we will never come. But everyone is on somebody's list. Well, for you, the wait is over. See those people on the street pretending you don't exist and this big machine with tinted windows doesn't exist, pretending that none of this is happening to you? That was you until just a few minutes ago.

El Paso Texas has been recognized as being one of the safest cities in America. Just across the Rio Grande lies the murder capital of the world. The city of lost girls. The largest city in the region. You guessed it. Juárez. Only a fence separates these cities- but they may as well be on different planets.

People from all over Mexico come to Ciudad Juárez in search of jobs. They work in factories, known as maquiladoras. Every day, thousands of girls and women get up and go to work. Everything's fine during the day. But as night falls, danger lurks around every corner. Most of them arrive home safely. Others are not so lucky. Somewhere between work and home, they are kidnapped, never to be seen again. They are raped, tortured, killed and dismembered.

Not all of them are maquiladora workers. Some of them are students. Some are housewives. Some are just children.

The brutal truth- more women are reported missing than are confirmed dead. The exact number of those murdered is unknown, most bodies are never found.

Worst part is, most of these cases are never solved. Who is responsible? Wealthy businessmen? Cartels? The police? The government? I think they're all involved. There are rumors of tampering with evidence and planting false DNA. And the craziest thing of all- they've been giving families the wrong bodies! Yes you

read it right. Just when you thought you heard it all.

Like the rest of us, he was a dead man walking.

Witnesses are too afraid to tell the truth. Can't say I blame them. If you say something, you're dead.

There are good cops in Juárez. Good men. Unfortunately, more often than not, they are killed. Or forced to quit their job. There are three options- follow bad orders, do what's right and get executed, or get the hell out of Dodge. The same goes for reporters.

These are the true stories of the unbelievable and the unimaginable. The people in this book are real and not fictional. A victim of a gang-rape who was shunted aside because her case was not considered an emergency. A reporter, who is on the run from the Mexican army. A beautiful girl, referred to as Miss Sinaloa, who lost her mind after being raped by eight policemen. El Pastor, who cares for the insane and broken because no one else will. A Sicario turned from predator to prey. And many, many more.

Miss Sinaloa goes on and on. Her name changes as does her face. Every day, week, month, she shows up in the city with a new identity with her face made up, her high-heeled shoes, tight skirt, and fragrance. And each time she comes to the city, she is adored, raped, thrown in the trash, and lives on with a maimed mind. She never forgets, and the city always forgets her. She has those lush lips, that long hair and fair skin. She can never be important. She is not the drug industry, she is not free trade, she is not national security. She is the blood and dreams of a people. I will never forget her. Just as she will never be remembered.

The dead girls are usually dumped in the desert. Pink crosses are erected at death scenes, they have become widely recognized as a symbol of femicide.

I can understand why some people didn't enjoy the book. Murder City isn't meant to be enjoyed. It's dark and even a little pretentious. The book's biggest plus is the writing style. It's darkly poetic. Hence the four stars.

Relax. This is a nice car, no? We're gonna have us a time.

Angie Taylor says

This book is disturbing. Disturbing in number of deaths. Disturbing in the questions of what is fact and false. Disturbing in the implications that the solutions to the problems in Juarez aren't working. Disturbing in it's entirety.

At times the book reads like a poetic stream of consciousness lamenting the loss of innocence, loss of a people, loss of feeling for what is right and wrong, and a loss of humanity. Throughout Bowden's lament, stories of individuals surface. The people's stories weave in and out of each others and the violence

surrounding them. An ever searching reason for why the violence doesn't stop permeates throughout.

Living so close to where these events have taken place and are taking place is disturbing. Not because of proximity, but because I was so unaware of what was going on, and knowing that there is nothing I could have done, or do to alleviate the problem. Although I'm not sure how I feel about all the ideas presented in this book about why such violence is occurring, I applaud Charles Bowden for making the dead's stories known.

Amar Pai says

This book, like Bowden's earlier work *Down By The River*, makes me so angry I feel like I'm suffocating. People who believe in the "War on Drugs" are so completely disconnected from reality that no rational arguments are even worth mustering. At this point it's like arguing against belief in God. He exists because he exists. Drugs are bad because drugs are bad. The War on Drugs is working because it is working.

50,000 dead in Mexico since Calderon commenced the current "crackdown on cartels." The violence is at a level that nobody in the U.S. could possibly believe. "Plan Merida" sent billions to the Mexican military to fight the cartels. The Mexican military brutalizes Mexico just like the cartels but nobody dares report on any of it because reporters get killed. Juarez is a black hole from which no information escapes. Cartels use the DEA/FBI to knock off their competitors. Through all the torture murders, disappearances, rapes, executions, assassinations, beheadings, strangulations, the flow of drugs and profits remains constant.

AAARGH what's the point of ranting, you either open your eyes or you don't. Americans don't. We can't legalize drugs because we can't. The drug smugglers would just do something else. The DEA/FBI are effective. Cartels are separate from government. Banks are not the enemy. The current system is working. Just give it more time. Just give them more money. God I can see why Bowden lapses into elliptical poetical fragments, it's because the reality is too hard to take straight on.

Taking a step back, Bowden isn't really concerned with elucidating the details of who is killing who, what the larger picture is. He knows the conventional explanation-- collapse of the PRI (ruling party in Mexico for almost a century) resulted in the traditional cartel/govt. accommodation breaking down, and since cartels were no longer protected by govt. they started feuding/retaliating with army and each other. But Bowden's thesis is that all these explanations at this point are just-so tales, and the reality is that violence is no longer tied to any rational framework in Juarez-- it exists like the atmosphere, inescapable and chaotic and just the new reality. This bleak outlook is perhaps unhelpful to anybody trying to fix the situation, but after covering this stuff for 20+ years while the US looks on indifferently (or worse) I think his jaundiced view is understandable.

Donate to Drug Policy Alliance: <http://www.drugpolicy.org/>

Watch the *Wire*, understand why "drugs on the table" is a joke

Vote for politicians/initiatives in favor of ending military aid to Mexico, mandatory sentencing laws, marijuana prohibition. Make it clear this is not a "wedge issue" and that "soft on drugs" is just a meaningless dog whistle

Realize that the second Prohibition has not worked any better than the first. It will never work. No matter

what the consequences of legalizing/decriminalizing/changing current US drug policy, it can't be any worse than what's happening now. Understand what is happening now.

<http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/01/...>

Eddie says

From the very first page, I was hooked. This was a side of Juarez that I had no idea was going on. All I ever hear about that place, is it's really bad over there and it's right next door to good ol' El Paso, Texas. This isn't a feel good book, whatsoever. It isn't a solution to the problem, either. It's a book just stating the facts on the nightmare that is taking place and is being swept under the rug by politicians, government, and media outlets for many reasons, but mostly due to fear and not knowing how to solve a problem that has grown to enormous proportions. There were parts in this book that even gave me the creeps. One good thing it did, though, was put a different spin on the safety, compared to there, that I feel here in the United States. This book is well written and is a definite eye opener. As dark, creepy and overall sad this book was, I couldn't put it down for the life of me.

Michael says

This is, without a doubt, one of the most dark and disturbing books I have read in a long time. I heard the author talking on NPR last week, and I was so captivated by his story that I ordered the brand new hardcover on Amazon, something I rarely do.

I have, for years now, been fascinated with Ciudad Juarez in Mexico. Most people have heard about the 'femicides' that have taken place there over the past ten years or so: hundreds and hundreds of young women raped and murdered, with virtually no one arrested, tried, or convicted for the crimes. Two films have been made about the murders, one starring Jennifer Lopez (which I saw) and one with Minnie Driver (which I didn't see). Perhaps I became interested because of my long-ago studies in college related to serial murder and profiling. Perhaps I just couldn't believe something so awful could be taking place a stone's throw from the United States. Whatever it was, I have studied Juarez over the past few years, and what I have learned makes me sick.

Now, "Murder City" has opened my eyes even wider. Over the past three or four years, more than 5,000 people have been killed with virtually no response from law enforcement. The cartels battle each other. The police kill civilians. The federal police kill the local police. The Mexican Army kills everyone. Men kill their wives, girlfriends, and daughters with complete impunity. It is, quite literally, Hell on earth. Poverty, drug addiction, prostitution, pollution, hunger, kidnapping, torture, insanity, disease, and--above all--violence, violence, violence. As I read, I kept thinking about the old Stanley Kubrick movie "A Clockwork Orange." Pointless, blanketing, smothering violence at every level in this sad, broken place. "A wee bit of the old ultra-violence," as the main character, Alex, said in the film. Ultra-violence indeed.

The author doesn't try to explain why all of this is happening. He compares it to sunlight: it just is. Globalization, NAFTA, the War on Drugs...for all I know, the Devil himself. Utterly horrifying. I pity the people of Mexico, I truly do. May God have mercy on all of them, and on us, for our part in creating this nightmare.

I am going to send some money to a small charity that I found in Juarez. It's the least that I can do.

Rob Maynard says

The original New Journalism was everything good in the potential for reportage and also held the seeds of its own seeming destruction. The magic that flowed into magazines and books from the minds of Mailer and Capote, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson, and others defined eras and events and personalities in a way that traditional novels and traditional journalism could not. Wolfe and Thompson, in particular, were such stylists that the writing and perspective itself looked so different that caused generations who followed them to try, try, try too hard to emulate them. Poorly executed attempts by "the next" Tom Wolfe or Hunter Thompson wasted thousands of pages over the years, most of it thin gruel compared to the masters.

In discovering Charles Bowden by picking *Murder City* up off the 'recommended' display at my local public library branch I have found a writer that embodies everything that first wave stood for--style, pointillist detail, first person narrative of gripping society-wide impactful events, poetic language and novelistic grip. Bowden immerses himself in Juarez for the awful tale of a Narco-Terrorist state just across from our border, where normal, civil society as we know it has largely ceased to exist and the government is at war with drug cartels over the profits to be gained by selling America our prohibited drugs.

Bowden's ongoing, nightmare tone poem about Miss Sinaloa, local beauty queen who comes to Juarez and is gang raped by cartel foot soldiers, is as creepy a metaphor for an entire society as any I've read. His conversation with a cartel sicario(hit man)reveals both awful detail and dreadful realization that in Chihuahua State kidnapping, torture, murder and body disposal are the only ways out for ambitious dead-end kids without inherited wealth.

Aside from Bowden's amazing writing and reportage, he hammers home again and again a point that I knew in my bones before reading this but now acknowledge as fact--the narrative we are sold in the MSM that we are 'partnering' with the Mexican Government to fight the cartels is bunk, bad information, the current Big Lie. The long-serving PRI Mexican Government had a cooperative relationship with the cartels until the most recent government changeover several years back. Since then, the government is at war with the cartels over who gets the pot, coke, meth, and heroin proceeds. The average person on the ground in Juarez is as terrified of being 'disappeared' by the police or army as they are of being executed or tortured the Sinaloa Cowboys or the Zetas. The Zetas, in fact, started as a rogue element of the Mexican Army Special Forces. Apparently PRI is poised to re-take the Mexican Government in upcoming elections, and the realpolitik hope by the comfortable classes there is that everyone will go back to their earlier split of the proceeds and let the War On Drugs in Mexico return to its earlier cold war status.

In any event, don't read this book if you don't want to know about all that. Bowden's writing is a revelation, and I will seek out his other work as I am able. *Murder City* is the current mark on the wall for New Journalism IMHOP, and is worthy of consideration along with those Mt. Rushmore-ian figures I mentioned earlier.

Karin Cope says

For the whole review, see my blog entry [here](#):

<http://visiblepoetry.blogspot.ca/2011...>

Note, Chuck Bowden is no longer with us; he died in August 2014.

It begins as follows:

On February 17th, on my way to Mexico, I begin reading Chuck Bowden's *Murder City: Ciudad Juarez and the Global Economy's New Killing Fields*. We'd heard him interviewed on the radio in January, his voice languid and haunted, cracking from the speaker like something from the other side of death. Which in a way, he is. He's been counting Mexico's dead and often brutally dismembered--journalists, photographers, prostitutes, police, Central American immigrants, drug addicts, homeless, mentally ill, children, tourists, students, mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, passersby--the mounting "collateral damage" of the joint US-Mexican "war on drugs." This month, May, the numbers of Mexico's dead stagger towards 40,000.

Bowden's book reads like poetry; it's an elegy for missing people; a maddened cry; a descent into hell.

Small details arc through the text. For the most part, Bowden cites newspaper stories--this one, for example, the 907th "murder" story filed in 2008 by his friend Armando Rodriguez, who was then gunned down before the story appeared. As Rodriguez wrote in *El Diario in Ciudad Juarez* the night before his own death: "The man assassinated Tuesday night in the Diaz Ordaz viaduct was a street clown, according to the state authority. Nevertheless, this person has not been identified, but it was reported that he was between 25 and 30 years old, 1.77 meters tall, delicate, light brown complexion, short black hair" (vi).

Nothing is known; everything is known; names are rarely reported. This is why, recently, in the days of protest called for by poet Javier Sicilia, whose 24 year old son, Juan Francisco, was tortured and killed in March near Cuernavaca, there has been a move to post the names of the dead in town and city squares all over the country. As Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos wrote in his letter of support for Javier Sicilia's call to action, from "somewhere in the mountains of southeast Mexico:" "[W]e know well that to name the dead is a way of not abandoning them, of not abandoning ourselves."

Thus, for a part of one year, 2008, in just one place, Ciudad Juarez, which lies across the mostly dry Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas, Bowden tries to track and to name every one among the dead or brutally injured that he can find. He fails miserably.

Partly because he loses heart--or rather, he and his assistant Molly Molloy do--and partly because it is impossible. This is, in fact, one of the reasons they lose heart. As he writes in the introduction to his Appendix, titled "The River of Blood," an effort to track and translate the daily press reports of the dead, "At first, it is simply a clerical task. Read the papers and put down the names, if given, and the time and cause of death....[But] by June 2008, the city cannot handle its own dead and starts giving corpses wholesale to medical schools or tossing bodies into common graves. The list of the dead becomes a dark burden as solid information dwindles. And so it finally trails off, a path littered with death and small voices whispering against the growing night" (237). Elsewhere he notes, "By the summer of 2009, Juarez looks back on the slaughter of 2008 as the quiet time" (233).

But I've not gotten to this point in the book on February 17th when my flight lands in Phoenix, Arizona. Still, I understand one very important thing already: Bowden is tracking a logic of death, a pattern to the killings that will be, as he puts it, "coming soon" to cities all over the world. It's already scheduled, we could say, for a city near you.

Aron says

I found this book extremely frustrating. Bowden did some terrific investigative reporting and when he lets the people he met talk for themselves, the book is fascinating, terrifying and moving. But when he goes on and on about his own anger and frustration, it just sounds self-righteous and his writing deteriorates. Not that I doubt his rage is genuine, it's just that his style becomes florid and overly melodramatic. The situation is dramatic as it is. No need to hit your readers over the head with the obvious.

Another problem is that Bowden repeats himself over and over. Perhaps the book started as a collection of separate articles so Bowden has to repeat parts of the stories to bring readers up to speed. But in the book, where you just read the same thing a few pages earlier, it is annoying. One wonders where the editors are these days.

Finally Bowden hits us over the head with his argument that Ciudad Juarez is the future for all of us in a globalized capitalist world. He constantly repeats that all other explanations for the situation are just not the truth, but he doesn't provide any evidence for his argument beyond his own rage. The fact is everything he tells us indicates that all the explanations are not false, but partial truths that together create the horrifying situation in Mexico.

Despite my criticism this book is definitely worth reading to get new insights into what is happening south of the Rio Grande. Just skim through Bowden's pontificating and listen to the Mexicans speak for themselves.

Betsy Kalman says

Bowden takes the reader into Juarez and renders the depravity, the violence and the odd humanity of the sicarios--the assassins in a method that is emotionally devastating. "We are not monsters," an assassin explains. "We have education, we have feelings. I would leave torturing someone, go home, and have dinner with my family, and then return. You shut off parts of your mind. It is a kind of work, you follow orders." The city's residents are so completely unable to protect themselves and their families it is amazing that life goes on in this desolate city.

Bowden's conclusion tracks with the biblical concept of evil. One of the few uncorrupted men in the city is El Pastor, who directs Bowden to Ephesians 6:10-13, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."

In a city where nothing makes sense, this is the only place Bowden can find resonance, and he this is where he leaves his reader.

Joshua Buhs says

Scorching.

Charles Bowden knows the Southwest. He knows Ciudad Juárez. He's walked its streets, He's talked to its people. He has no patience for armchair pundits. He knows where the bodies are buried.

Literally.

Bowden's book is about Juárez in the year of 2008, when--as John Wesley Harding said a decade before--pointless death's become/A brand new way of life and the murder rate skyrocketed to several hundred in the single year. Bowden tried to keep track of them all before becoming disgusted. He tried to quit, but couldn't. He talked to the government and the police, read the newspapers, and found them full of lies, half-truths, and speculation.

It was the drug cartels, said the officials, killing each other.

Not quite, said Bowden. The geography of drug dealing had changed, making Juárez central, and certainly drug dealing had something to do with all the deaths. But the police, the military--they were killing and raping, too, with impunity, Juárez was lawless.

Don't write it off as just a Mexico problem, though, Bowden says. We may be looking at the future: a time when the institutions of the state remain, but are ineffective. This is not a new social organization, but a new way of life. One is tempted to think that Bowden's perspective has been poisoned by all the pointless death he has witnessed, and maybe the whole thing is a bit too pessimistic. But then look at what's going on in Ferguson. Hell, look at what's going on in Wall Street. It's true that privilege has always excused itself, and shit has always rolled downhill. The question remains, are things getting worse?

Bowden finds some bits of hope: a pastor--himself a former druggie--founds an asylum of sorts on the outskirts of the city, where the broken can congregate. There are a few journalists willing to call the powers-that-be on their actions, though they are certain to be put on a death-list.

The writing is intimate, even poetic, Bowden at times addressing the reader straight on, at other times versifying news reports. The book is sometimes repetitive, the structure obscure, but that serves its ultimate point of showing the confusion, the mundanity of the horror.

I couldn't help but wonder if Bowden at some point had read Charles Fort or Tiffany Thayer. His critique was essentially a Fortean one: experts knew nothing, newspapers invented stories that flattered the powerful, and the real mechanics behind the events are yet undiscovered.

A very unsettling book.

John says

Putting the subject matter aside for a second (if only I could put it aside forever), this book really changed my notion of what a non-fiction book can be. My book diet skews heavily towards the fiction side of things (not my short reads, mind you—if I'm reading something shorter than 10,000 words, chances are it's non-fiction), and the stereotype notion of a standard non-fiction book that I carry around in my head is something that is basically an extended essay—the author (usually a journalist) has an outline that conveys the point she is trying to make, and the prose functions only to carry the reader through that outline as efficiently as possible. The notion that a non-fiction book can impressionistically convey a situation, rather than teleologically drive home a point, is not something I would have given the genre credit for. That such a book could be written in a voice every bit as distinct as a work of literary fiction, where voice is often more important than the “point”, is definitely something I would not have expected opening up a book from the

non-fic section of my library.

But then there's Charles Bowden and Ciudad Juarez. Even though this book is a chronicle of large-scale and absolutely desperate barbarity, Bowden's voice is that of a non-fiction Cormac McCarthy: rambling and full of digressions and circumlocutions, but always returning to the horrifying subject at hand with a pared-down prose style and an unflinching portrayal of violence and tragedy. The narrative follows several people—a repentant contract killer, the founder of a desert rehabilitation center and one of its occupants—but unlike non-fiction of a more journalistic bent, Bowden does not try to extract some facile, ready-made, over-simplified “meaning” from their lives. He just gives us a slice of their lives and say “Now you have an inkling of what it's like.”

To the extent that Bowden has a larger "point," it is not just that Ciudad Juarez is the bloodiest city on Earth—indeed, Bowden does not seem interested in tracing the history that lead Juarez to its current state of mayhem the way that, say, Jason Stearns did with the Congo. Rather, hanging over every story in this book is the fact that the humanitarian disaster of the drug war, for which Juarez is ground zero, is a direct result of decisions made by elected officials in Washington DC, and, by extension, of the people who elected them. That is, the blood that has been and is being spilled as part of the drug trade and the so-called “war on drugs” is on the hands of every citizen of the United States. We are all participants, unwilling or not, in a democratic society that does absolutely nothing to rein in the murderous force our government aids abets within walking distance of the Rio Grande. Our appetite for cocaine and marijuana puts weapons in the hands of one side, and our simultaneous desire to enforce the strict prohibition of these substances arms the other. The net result is blood and torment by the trailer-load. I wish this book would be taught in high school civics classes.

Jason says

If you could reduce this book to one sentence, it would be this: The murder rate in Ciudad Juarez is now higher than any other city in North America--EVER--and with no significant change in demography or law enforcement procedure, it will continue to climb annually!

Imagine a continuum. On the far left is genocide. On the far right is municipal murder rate. The continuum only captures, say, the last 20 years. (This continuum does not include conventional warfare, where uniformed combatants meet on a battlefield and follow Laws of Armed Conflict.)

On the far left, fading to the right ARE

- 1983-2002: Sudanese civil war (2 million)
- 1988-2001: Afghanistan civil war (400,000)
- 1988-2004: Somalia's civil war (550,000)
- 1989-: Liberian civil war (220,000)
- 1991-97: Congo's civil war (800,000)
- 1991-2000: Sierra Leone's civil war (200,000)
- 1991-2009: Russia-Chechnya civil war (200,000)
- 1991-94: Armenia-Azerbaijan war (35,000)
- 1992-96: Tajikistan's civil war war (50,000)
- 1992-96: Yugoslavian wars (260,000)
- 1993-97: Congo Brazzaville's civil war (100,000)
- 1993-2005: Burundi's civil war (200,000)

1994: Rwanda's civil war (900,000)
1998-: Congo/Zaire's war (3.8 million)
2003-09: Sudan vs JEM/Darfur (300,000)

On the far right, fading to the left, are US MURDERS

1996: 19,650
1997: 18,208
1998: 16,914
1999: 15,522
2000: 15,586
2001: 16,037
2002: 16,229
2003: 16,528
2004: 16,148
2005: 16,740
2006: 17,030
2007: 16,929
2008: 16,272

At times the municipal murder rates may peak, like Miami in the 70's, New York in the 80's, Los Angeles in the 90's, and New Orleans in the 00's. However, these rates are for the entire United States, with a population of 300 million.

In Ciudad Juarez, a single city with a population of roughly 1 million, the number of murders are:

2008: 1607
2009: 2455

Extrapolate. This means that a single mid-sized Mexican city has 10% of the murders of an entire country 300 times its size! Read that again. This means that a single mid-sized Mexican city has 10% of the murders of an entire country 300 times its size! Compared to the US, Ciudad Juarez's murder rate is a perverse outlier. The number of murders represents TWO magnitudes of order multiplied by a factor of three. In other words, if the United States had a similar murder rate as Ciudad Juarez, then in 2008: 482,000 murders, and in 2009: 736,000 murders. At this murder rate would you be a concerned US citizen? You betcha would!

So where in that continuum would Ciudad Juarez best fit? Looks to me like it would be closer to the left side--near the genocides. The paper napkin math above is not provided by the author, but I think it makes the point. Ciudad Juarez has a problem. It's got a murder problem. And it's at genocidal proportions. You'd be safer in Mogadishu, Somalia or Kabul, Afghanistan.

Now the book. Charles Bowden has the cold facts as his disposal, yet he chooses to write the book somewhat like a diary. He wanted to reveal what this murder rate has done to the citizens of Juarez. An eerie malaise has descended on this border city. There has not been a single arrest for murder in 2 years; not a single killer brought to trial. Nobody talks about the murders--even if they have relevant information. The police are corrupt, the army is corrupt, the newspaper is corrupt, your neighbors are corrupt. The army is killing cops, the cops are killing informants, informants are killing dealers, dealers are killing each other, and the cartels are killing everybody. Collusion in Juarez is a 3-dimensional web that is perpetually being re-woven. Women and children are being killed in great numbers. And the killings are peculiar in their brutality. Most of the bodies have signs of torture, strangulation, amputation, and decapitation. Mass graves of 30+ people are not uncommon. People who've simply disappeared are not part of the murder count--not part of the

count, that is, until their bodies are discovered years later.

Brown writes in a trippy, Jim Morrison, Riders on the Storm type of riff that highlights the killings by exposing the absurdity of daily life in this broken town. Brown takes you on a ride through the heat, the haze, the dust, and the fear in Juarez. The murders happen with such spinning regularity that for 320 pages you feel drugged and listening to a long bass guitar and piano organ solo. Over and over the bodies keep appearing. Their crumpled, limbless bodies appear every morning like dead cicadas. Police take hours to arrive at the scene of a murder. Why? Because they want to make sure the scene is safe to approach. The maimed are not taken to the hospital immediately because the killers will invade the emergency room and spray a magazine of bullets to finish the job. The dead may be the lucky ones. Gang rapes, molestation, severe beatings, and cellar slavery happen every day. Sporadic in the book, Brown interleaves the obituaries of the unidentified dead. Life rolls on; the dead are forgotten; newspapers mention nothing; Riders on the Storm.

The overriding conclusion I draw from this book is that the US war on drugs has not--and will not--work in Mexico. Period. I make this conclusion independent of Brown's commentary. It's also my political position on our drug problem in the States. Oh, and if your wonder, murder rates in 2010 are staged to set yet another record.

I wish Bowden stayed in non-fiction territory, because his book has the feel of a long diary. It works, but it's much of the same, chapter after chapter. However, if this is the first you've heard that the Mexican border is dangerous, then this is mandatory reading for you.

Jamie says

Please be advised that there will be no apocalypse. The very idea of a Götterdämmerung assumes meaning and progress. You cannot fall off a mountain unless you are climbing. No one here is slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. We shall not meet next year in Jerusalem. For years, I thought I was watching the city go from bad to worse, a kind of terrible backsliding from its imagined destiny as an America with different food. I was blind to what was slapping me in the face: the future.

Razed, spoiled, polluted, corrupted, exploited, more bloody than our bloodiest war zone, this is not our past, argues Bowden. This is not our failure. This is our success. This is our progress. We have triumphed. We are complicit. We are on the bold march.

After decades of this thing called development, Juárez has in sheer numbers more poor people than ever, has in real purchasing power lower wages than ever, has more pollution than ever, and more untreated sewage and less water than ever. Every claim of a gain is overwhelmed by a tidal wave of failure. And yet this failure, I have come to realize, is not failure. The gangs are not failure. The corrupt police are not failure. The drugs, ever cheaper and more potent and more widespread, are not failure. The media is increasingly tame here, just as it is in that place that once proudly called itself the first world, a place now where wars go on with barely a mention and the dead are counted but not photographed.

All the other things happening in the world— the shattering of currencies, the depletion of resources, the skyrocketing costs of food, energy, and materials— are old hat here. Years ago,

hope moved beyond reach, and so a new life was fashioned and now it crowds out all other notions of life.

Juárez is not behind the times. It is the sharp edge slashing into a time called the future.

There's one line Ed Abbey keeps going to repeatedly, trying to drive home the fate of the west's unchecked "progress," the west's ravaged resources, the west's corrupt infrastructure that largely exploits. What's the future? he asks, and he points to the precedent: "Ask any Indian. Ask any Appalachian."

Except now we have been trumped. We have been passed. Here's Juárez as the beacon, a couple of decades— if we're so lucky— down the same road.

Look at what people do to survive. Measure their words, and you will find that in Juárez, as in every other place in the world, some people are truthful and some are liars. But don't ask who is innocent and who is dirty, because everyone here tries to eat and drink and we have no pure food or water.

We are the future. We watch governments erode and bluster. We watch cops strut and steal. We watch dealers operate in broad daylight. We work hard and get little.

And we survive.

And don't ask how.

Jerry Peace says

Magnificent, horrendous account. Brutally poetic and should be required reading for all Americans, particularly the ones who scream so blithely and inanely and pitifully ignorantly about illegals and refugees. We have no idea the courage of the people of Juarez for simply rising each morning, going to work, to school, to the store. El Pastor is a hero, not all the guys with guns, not any of the guys with guns. Bowden paints a charnel house, yet, yet, with a strange beauty, something irresistible while almost but not quite smothered by pain. I hope things are better now.
