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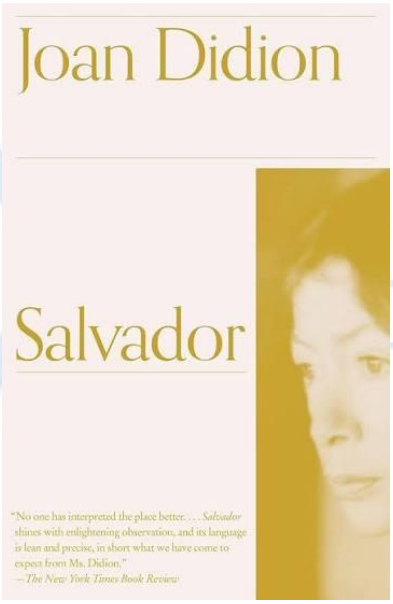
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Book Reviews

Salvador

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Joan Didion | Simon & Schuster | 1983

"In El Salvador, one learns that the vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, the exposed genitalia, the open mouth. One learns that an open mouth can be used to make a specific point, can be stuffed with something emblematic; stuffed, say, with a penis, or, if the point has to do with land title, stuffed with some of the dirt in question."

Brief Overview

A haunting look at the Salvadoran civil war between the US-backed military Junta and Farabundo Martí National Libération Front (FMLN), a coalition of leftist opposition groups,

Salvador by Joan Didion captures the chaos and brutality of a place where death and terror have become ordinary and truth evermore elusive. A piece of literary reportage that grew into a book from three essays that Didion wrote for the New York Review of Books, it is a scrupulous critique of the moral blindness and self-deceptions of US foreign policy.

Main Themes

The Banality of the Brutality during War

Perhaps the book's central theme, one that Didion explores with admirable skill, is the ordinariness of violence in the country and the ever-present sense of dread among its citizens. "These are the details– the models and colours of armoured vehicles, the makes and calibres of weapons, the particular methods of dismemberment and decapitation used in particular instances– on which the visitor to Salvador learns immediately to concentrate, to the exclusion of past or future concerns, as in a prolonged amnesiac fugue", she writes, describing the place's pervasive terror.

Rhetoric as a Tool in Diplomacy and Foreign Policy

Furthermore, Didion masterfully critiques the manipulation of language as a means of justifying and normalising violence. "Language as it is now used in El Salvador is the language of advertising, of persuasion, the product being one or another of the soluciones crafted in Washington or Panama or Mexico," writes Didion, as we witness government, military, and U.S. officials using bureaucratic phrases and euphemisms to obscure the reality of violence and repression.

Failures of the American Foreign Policy

Additionally, Didion offers a critique of American policy on intervention in El Salvador, at one point comparing it to "a dreamwork devised to obscure any intelligence that might trouble the dreamer." We see disillusionment with American foreign policy due to its refusal to accept the realities of inequality and repression in the country, as well as its tendency to reduce the conflict to Cold War terms of communism versus democracy.

Limitations of Objectivity during Conflict

Further, Didion explores the lack of objectivity in reporting from a conflict zone, as she struggles to discern the truth in a place where chaos reigns and facts and figures become increasingly elusive. She describes "a great deal of what goes on is considered ineffable."

Key figures

Roberto D' Aubuisson

A Salvadoran military officer and a neo-fascist politician, he was the founder of the Alianza Republicana Nacionalista (ARENA) party. He is widely believed to have been involved in orchestrating the death squads as well as the assassination of the archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador at the time. In Salvador, he increasingly comes to personify far-right terror in the country.

Ambassador Deane Hinton

From 1981 to 83, during the Reagan Administration, he served as the U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador. After his predecessor was relieved of his position, he was a key figure in American diplomatic efforts to manage the Salvadoran crisis. In Salvador, he appears as an example of bureaucratic detachment, representing the inability of American foreign policy to reckon with moral collapse.

Writing Style

Didion deploys her signature cinematic prose to paint a vivid picture of the terror that pervades El Salvador. Her work is impressionistic, mirroring the confusion and disorientation of El Salvador during the civil war. Didion is detached yet observant as she tries to assemble facts that grow increasingly elusive.

However, her cool cynicism sometimes gives way to helplessness. We witness this in her writing, "As I waited to cross back over the Boulevard de los Heroes to the Camino Real, I noticed soldiers herding a young civilian into a van, their guns at the boy's back, and I walked straight ahead, not wanting to see anything at all."

Conclusion

Salvador may not be the sharp political analysis of the Salvadoran Civil War, limited both by the author's understanding of the place as well as the time she was there– two weeks only. However, it serves as a masterful critique of the repetitive self-delusions of American foreign policy. Further, it forces the reader to do something more crucial: to bear witness to the darkness in a nation consumed by fear and terror, and to the hollowness of the rhetoric governments use to justify such cruelty.

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