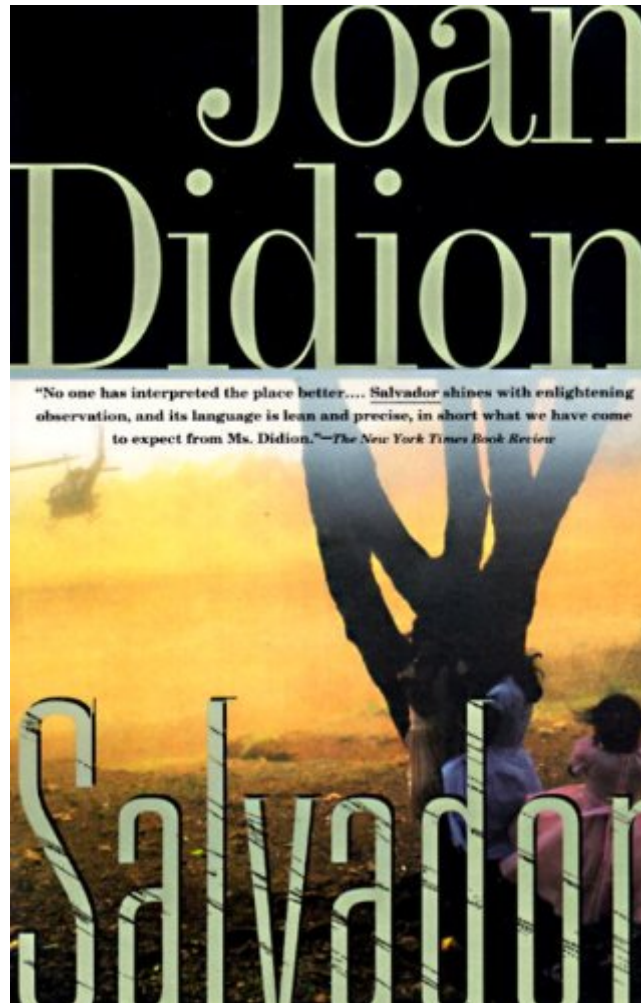




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Salvador (Vintage International)



Synopsis

"Terror is the given of the place." The place is El Salvador in 1982, at the ghastly height of its civil war. The writer is Joan Didion, who delivers an anatomy of that country's particular brand of terrorâ "its mechanisms, rationales, and intimate relation to United States foreign policy. As ash travels from battlefields to body dumps, interviews a puppet president, and considers the distinctly Salvadoran grammar of the verb "to disappear," Didion gives us a book that is germane to any country in which bloodshed has become a standard tool of politics. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

While this book was interesting, it was too round about in how it was written. At the end of reading it I was not sure what point the author was trying to make about El Salvador. I came away from it thinking that El Salvador is a very messed up country I would never want to visit, but I doubt that was the message the author was trying to send away.

Salvador is Didion's account her 2-week trip to El Salvador in 1982, then a country in the early stages of a 12 year brutal civil war. Her opening report describes some of the carnage and the everyday terror Salvadorans experience. The opening report is a vividly disturbing picture of just how cruel we can be to one another. From there Didion describes her encounters with various powerful citizens and American embassy officials, who relate the corruption and the utter confusion that permeates this civil war from the top to the bottom. From these interviews it is fairly plain to see that the Salvadorans and those in charge have become desensitized to the violence and disappearances, and are largely apathetic to any reforms proposed by the government. Yet the terror is still very much with them without abatement. Reconciliation is clearly not on the table and the average citizen has no hope that this war is ending soon. Also, discussed to some extent is the ineffectiveness of the U.S. Foreign policy in the murkiness of the civil war. A war in which our allies are more content with the continuation of this war in order to consolidate power rather than fight over ideological outcome or for a greater purpose. In the wake of needless bloodshed on such a massive scale, all an ambassador can do is work towards small victories like trials before executions and doing everything possible to insure the safety of the citizens in their charge. Salvador is not a factual history of the war in 1982. It is, however, the war seen through the eyes of a journalist with limited time and resources in country. Bias is inherent in this kind of journalism and time and events told second hand become as fluid as the eye witness accounts. Didion tries to elevate these problems by sprinkling quotes and statements taken from official and vetted sources related to story she is conveying. It's a one-sided truth, but I have no doubt that it is the truth to Didion. So while it's not a scholarly account of the events taking place in El Salvador in 1982, it is an invaluable piece that gives voice to the experiences and horrific events that shaped the lives of Salvadorans for over a decade. Advice for other writers: Do not attempt to write like Didion unless your name is Didion. She does things with her sentence structure I didn't think was possible. At no point in my wildest imagination would paragraph sized sentence featuring a colon, a semi-colon, eight commas, and two sets of parentheses come off as anything but a clunky mess. Yet Didion's prose is so smooth and her phrasing so good that I hardly ever took notice of her peculiar style. She spews words onto the page and it comes out as a coherent, well constructed thought. She's a remarkable talent

Well, we barely made the airport
For the last plane out
As we taxied down the runway
I could hear the people shout they said: "Don't come back here again. Yankee"
But if I do I'll bring back more money
Cause all she wants to do is dance - Danny Kortchmar

Reading Joan Didion's account of her

two week visit to El Salvador in 1982 at the height of the Salvadoran Civil War which was eventually to cost 75,000 lives is truly a trip back through time. Reagan ruled and the perceived evil of the time was communism and the worse kind was that found in the Americas. It was to be battled at any cost. Didion talks of terror but it is a different sort than what we speak of today. It is the terror of being disappeared, it is the terror of a menacing army who perceives that you are on the wrong side. Didion lunches with Victor Barriere, the grandson of General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, former president of El Salvador whom Gabriel Garcia Marquez used as a model for his book *The Autumn of the Patriarch*. The grandson tells Didion: "It was sometimes strange going to school with boys whose fathers my grandfather had ordered shot," Didion talks about how difficult it is to get accountable news in El Salvador. For each story there are dozens of variations. Everything is murky and obscure with an edge of danger permeating, nothing is clear. In this environment Didion feels that perhaps Gabriel Garcia Marquez could more aptly be labeled a social realist. Didion has written this interesting slim volume that takes you back through time. It is indeed told from a certain perspective and bias, but for those interested in the time period it is still a valuable and interesting read.

Joan Didion was on a roll in the 1980s, writing about the excesses of the Reagan administration and its fight against Communism. This is seen very clearly in *Salvador*, an account of her journey to El Salvador in the early 1980s. This was an extremely dangerous time to travel to that country. Embroiled in a civil war, reporters, aid workers and all manner of people were brutally slayed. Didion presents this palpable sense of fear with a well grounding in the exploration of the (then) current situation in the country, its history of violence and instability, and numerous American missteps in the region. A short, tense book, Didion captures a time of proxy American imperialism and narrowly sighted interests.

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