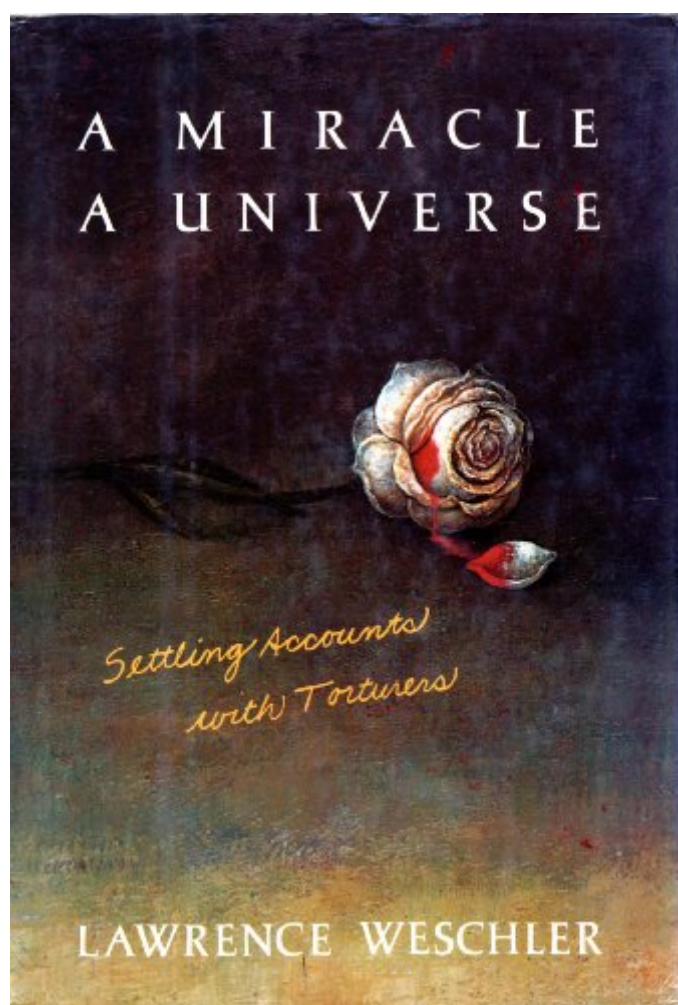


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A MIRACLE, A UNIVERSE: SETTLIN



Synopsis

In recent years as countries around the globe have begun to move from dictatorial to more democratic systems of governance, no more traumatic (or dramatic) ethical problem has arisen than what to do with the previous regime's torturers. In most cases, the security and military apparatuses, responsible for the overwhelming majority of human-rights abuses, still retain tremendous power and will not abide any settling of accounts. Now, New Yorker staff reporter Lawrence Weschler tells the extraordinary story of how, against tremendous odds, torture victims and human-rights activists in two Latin American countries—Brazil and Uruguay—tried to bring their torturers to justice and to rehabilitate their whole societies from harrowing periods of silence and repression. In this first of his two accounts, he tells how a tiny group of torture victims, clerics, and human-rights activists in Brazil launched an extremely risky, nonviolent plot to get even with the former torturers by publishing an indisputable account of their savage system of repression—indisputable because it is drawn from the regime's own files. In the second, set in Uruguay, he tells how a more broadly-based movement attempted to bring to light the dark history of a military regime engaged in more political incarceration per capita than any other on earth at that time. In this illuminating and beautifully written book (portions of which appeared in five issues of The New Yorker), Weschler examines what a small number of individuals can do to retrieve history and truth from the hands of torturers.

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Customer Reviews

This is a magnificent book about a terrible subject. From the sixties through till the mid-Eighties, almost the entire continent of South America fell under the sway, or rather the boot, of military dictatorship. The dictatorships were, without exception but with varying degrees of vigour, active in torturing political prisoners. Weschler does a masterful job in describing the various forces that contributed to the overthrow of democracy throughout the Southern cone (not the least of which was American insistence on training Southern militaries and police forces in counter-insurgency in the hope that Castro's example would not spread further south), but the book's focus is not only the depravities of the two regimes -- Brazil and Uruguay -- but on the efforts of survivors of torture and imprisonment to make their oppressors see and recognise their evils. The first section, 'A miracle, a universe' recounts the incredible efforts that went into collating and publishing the account *Brasil: Nunca Mais* (Brazil: Never Again), a book which set forth the policies of systematic torture and denial of due process practiced by Brazil's dictators. The truly remarkable aspect of the work was that all the material was obtained from the regime's own archives, over a period of several years, and at great personal risk to the authors. It's an inspiring story, and one that demonstrates the power of the written word. The second and longer part of the book, 'The reality of the world', centres of the efforts of a committee in Uruguay to call those accused of torture during the country's decade-plus period of military dictatorship to account.

On March 15, 1979, General João Baptista Figueiredo assumed power as the fifth military president of Brazil and extended an amnesty for all political crimes, both by state security agents and by opponents to the regime. While this amnesty assured there would be no trials for human rights abusers, ironically, it provided an opportunity for the most serious movement to challenge the practice of torture by the regime itself, that of the *Brasil Nunca Mais* project. It is the story of this project that Lawrence Weschler narrates in the first half of this book. Weschler explains how, during a very limited period of access, the members of the *Brasil Nunca Mais* project team were able to photocopy the carefully catalogued archives of the Supreme Military Court in order to make them public to the world. They filled a void in Brazil in taking up activities that the state never would--mainly that of telling the truth about this dark period in Brazilian history. Of course, the resulting

report, *Brasil Nunca Mais*, speaks for itself. But Weschler's account of how it came to be is illuminating and as relevant today as when it was first published. It is particularly poignant that only recently, in November of 2005, did the Brazilian government move to declassify dictatorship-era files. Perhaps this signals that the Brazilian government is willing to fully engage with the legacies of the dictatorship, but for the time being Weschler's book offers one of the few windows on this shameful past. The section on Uruguay is also thoroughly engaging and recounts all the anxieties of a citizen-initiated campaign to bring former torturers to justice. Weschler's skillful eyewitness accounts make the reader feel as if the petition drive were happening right now, as opposed to two decades ago.

"A Miracle, A Universe" by Lawrence Weschler is a powerful narrative of struggle. Brazil was once ruled by a dictatorship, torture was rampant but democracy found its way to the people. With a new government, Brazil's formerly tortured victims felt they needed for social justice for the crimes committed against them. Weschler weaves interviews, his own experiences, and story together to describe the movement to publish the detailed records of torture brutally followed by the toppled military regime. As a writer, the author's style comes through the pages with clarity. Establishing a style that is consistent and allows the reader to understand his message. The dialogue he uses is blended fluidly throughout almost every page. It helps to move the plot forward by providing factual information in a more tangible way. By presenting people's voices, he creates a reality and a connection to their experiences. In the end, these innocent people find peace and release of their anger towards their abusers. With the wide spread acceptance of their account, the author further continues his analysis with the example of Uruguay's failed attempt to bring about justice. Uruguay's petition campaign, although put forward with petition by activists, and torture victims, would only end in unsuccessful disappointment. Utilizing probing insight, Weschler asks thought-provoking questions that challenges the reader to question their own beliefs. The use of repetition solidifies Weschler's style. His use of hyphens, italics, and transitions all come together to keep the reader on track. The repetition creates a lack of confusion. This way the information comes across clearly. Using a sentence structure creates a foundation for the way he presents his novel.

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