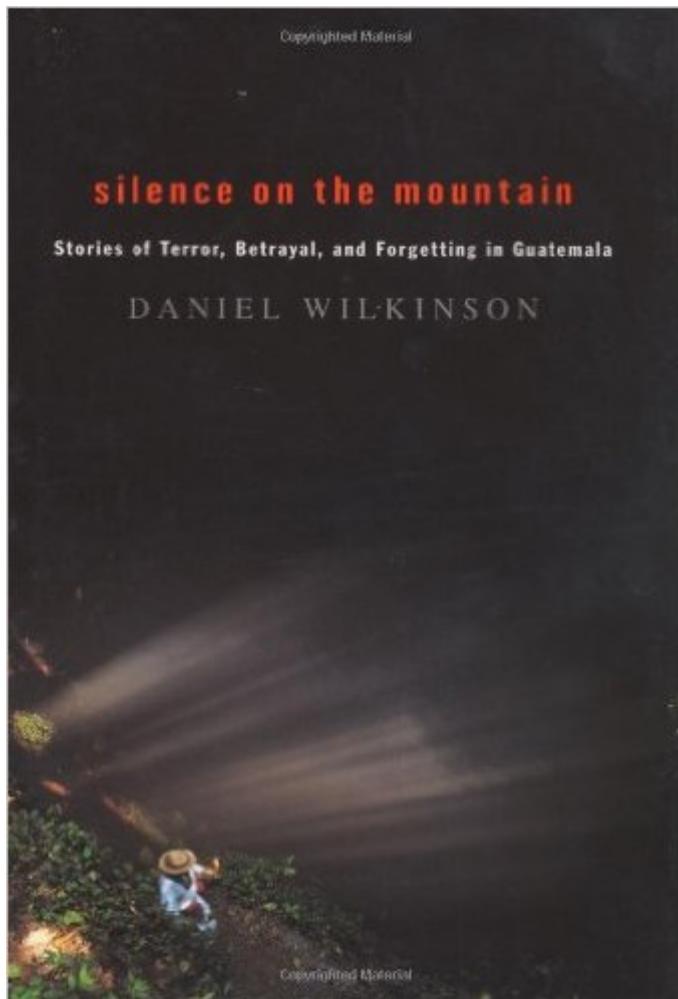


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Silence On The Mountain: Stories Of Terror, Betrayal, And Forgetting In Guatemala



Synopsis

Silence on the Mountain is a virtuoso work of reporting and a masterfully plotted narrative tracing the history of Guatemala's thirty-six-year internal war, a conflict that claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people, the vast majority of whom died (or were "disappeared") at the hands of the U.S.-backed military government. In 1993 Daniel Wilkinson, a young human rights worker, begins to investigate the arson of a coffee plantation's manor house by a band of guerrillas. The questions surrounding this incident soon broaden into a complex mystery that compels Wilkinson to seek out an impressive cross-section of the country's citizens, from coffee workers to former guerrillas to small-town mayors to members of the ruling elite. From these sources he is able to piece together the largely unwritten history of the long civil war, following its roots back to a land reform movement derailed by a U.S.-sponsored military coup in 1954 and, further back, to the origins of Guatemala's plantation system, which put Mayan Indians to work picking coffee beans for the American and European markets. Silence on the Mountain reveals a buried history that has never been told before, focusing on those who were most affected by Guatemala's half-century of violence, the displaced native people and peasants who slaved on the coffee plantations. These were the people who had most to gain from the aborted land reform movement of the early 1950s, who filled the growing ranks of the guerrilla movement in the 1970s and 1980s, and who suffered most when the military government retaliated with violence. Decades of terror-inspired fear have led Guatemalans to adopt a survival strategy of silence so complete it verges on collective amnesia. Wilkinson's great triumph is that he finds a way for people to tell their stories, and it is through these stories -- dramatic, intimate, heartbreaking -- that we come to see the anatomy of a thwarted revolution that is relevant not only to Guatemala but to any country where terror has been used as a political tool.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Daniel Wilkinson's "Silence on the Mountain: Stories of Terror, Betrayal, and Forgetting in Guatemala" is a balanced and well-written chronicle of State terror. The author dedicates many years, abandons law school and runs up credit card debt to research and write a glaring historical account of the struggle between large landowners and the poor in Guatemala. Wilkinson's early focus is on the 1950 presidential victory of Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. He then explains the daring 1952 implementation of a far-reaching Agrarian Reform law called Decree 900. The author reaches out to Guatemalan students who favored the reforms and declared that peace, "required greater equality and greater equality required a redistribution of land in the countryside." Wilkinson then flashes back to 1892 when twenty-three-year-old Friedrich Endler leaves Germany for Central America. Endler eventually becomes a large coffee plantation owner and it is through him the author explains the historical struggle with poor illiterate workers who provide the labor that builds a coffee nation. From there Wilkinson flashes forward to 1954 and the carefully choreographed CIA overthrow of democratically elected President Guzmán. Shortly thereafter agricultural students protested, "We who receive an education paid for by the people have a debt to the people! We who have the power to analyze have the responsibility to criticize! An agronomist should carry, in one hand, a machete...and, in the other, a machine gun." The remainder of the book is a painstaking tale of documenting the State terror of the 1980's when 200,000 Guatemalans perished. Quite frankly, parts of this book are brutal.

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