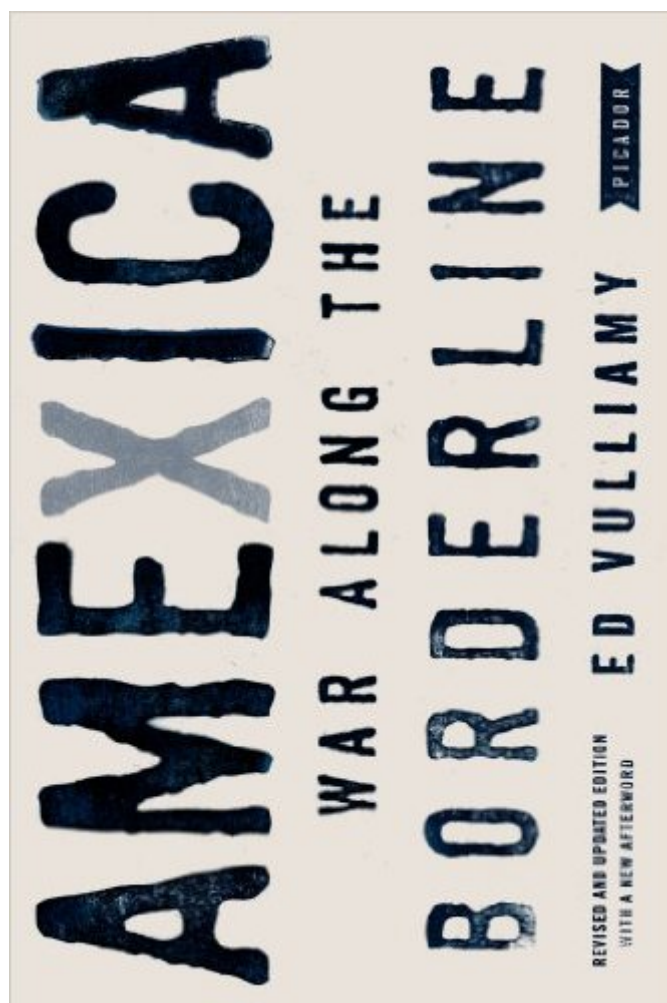


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Amexica: War Along The Borderline



Synopsis

With a New Afterword In 2009, Ed Vulliamy traveled two thousand miles along the frontier from the Pacific coast to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Tijuana to Matamoros, a journey through a kaleidoscopic landscape of corruption and all-out civil war. He describes in revelatory detail the dreaded narco gangs; the smuggling of people, weapons, and illegal drugs; and the interrelated economies of drugs and the ruthless, systematic murder of young women in Ciudad Juarez. Amexica takes us far beyond today's headlines. It is a street-level portrait, by turns horrific and sublime, of a place and people in a time of war as much as of the war itself, "an impressively rendered, nightmare-inducing account" (Kirkus Reviews, Top 25 Books of 2010).

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Customer Reviews

I'm a professional consultant, freelance writer, and author on Mexico's drug war, so I've read a LOT of books about this subject. These range from more scholarly works by academics like Dr George Grayson, to journalistic tomes by Charles Bowden and Malcolm Beith. I have to say, this has been my favorite book so far, if only because it makes the drug war seem so real and personal. To give you an idea of how the book is set up, Vulliamy starts at the western end of the border in the Tijuana/San Diego area, and works his way east. During his journey, he meets and interviews people on both sides of the border to get their perspectives on the impact the drug war has had on their lives, and what the region known as "Amexica" means to them. He talks to American law enforcement, Mexican drug addicts and priests, businessmen and the unemployed...you name it. His chapter on Ciudad Juárez does an amazing job of capturing the chaos and hopelessness of

the city - how no one knows anymore who's doing the killing, the rise in local drug addiction, the shockingly severe shortage of schools, the daily abandonment of children by parents who work in the maquiladoras, and the few souls who still hold out some hope. The author's journey doesn't have a formal structure, but that's one of the things I liked about it. He does arrange his stories as he travels from west to east, but the stories themselves are so incredibly engrossing that you just can't wait to see who he meets next, and what his or her story is going to be. It's at times eye-opening, funny, sad, shocking, and heart-wrenching. If you're looking for a source for an academic research piece, this isn't it. However, if you want to learn more about the drug war from the personal perspectives of people on the ground on both sides of the border and from all walks of life, this book is for you.

I learned a lot from this discussion of recent violent events along the border from Calif. to Tx. The author presents drug running, the murders of women in Juarez, and illegal entry in the context of globalization, provokes thoughts. Massive immigration to the border was spurred by the Maquiladoras there. Globalization based on cheap labor. My wife gave me the book for Christmas. I read it on our odyssey along and south of I-10 from Houston to Ajo, Az. during the school break. We talked with a border agent in El Paso at the rr tracks, with people in se Az. where a rancher was recently killed, with a park ranger at Apache Pass, and with a Tonho O'odham Indian in sw Az. on the Devil's Highway. All the while reading the book. Certainly, from the Indian standpoint the border makes no sense. We'd slept in van Horn before El Paso del Norte. The border agent (who removed his name badge for a photo) told us that Tommy Lee Jones has a ranch near van Horn and doesn't like the border patrol. He recommended Jones' film 'The Three Burials of Melquiades Estrada', and 'Bordertown', and said that the border is far worse than is depicted in (book, movie) 'No Country for Old Men'. I recommend all of those, plus a good, slow drive along and south of I-10 from Texas through Arizona. The wild, untamed landscape will grow on you, and you will begin to glimpse the vastly diverse viewpoints of the different people who populate that wild, sparse, mountainous and desert region. Don't avoid the drive through the O'odham reservation from Ajo to Sells, where the signs in the modern, well-stocked supermarket in Sells are in the Indian language. At Apache Pass there was sympathy on the part of the park rangers for the Apache. They told us that Cochise used to come down and play cards with the U.S. Cavalry before he was framed. In the O'odham nation, the Apache are not heroes. The region is complex and dangerous on the American side of 'the border'.

I found this a very difficult book to read, although I am accustomed to reading difficult academic texts. That's not what it is, however, although Vulliamy has read all the books on his subject and clearly also spent a lot of time in the border country. He has chosen to write a very long magazine article which interweaves historical knowledge and analysis with a series of highly detailed from-the-gutter-up vignettes, for example an account of a rehab centre near Ciudad Juarez, run by recovered gangster/addicts, in an area where according to Vulliamy there is evidence that addicts are being systematically wiped out in a series of massacres conducted by the Mexican army. This stream of consciousness style takes some getting used to, and I had to browse through the book until I found a chapter which grabbed me, an account of an interview with an old-time lawman, accused by his 'superiors' of having a John Wayne attitude. From then I gradually got into Vulliamy's approach and returned to the beginning. However, so far I have not made it to the end, the stories are just too harrowing. Along with the incredible stories Vulliamy puts in some historical analysis, which suggests that Mexico has taken over Colombia's role as the principle courier of Latin American cocaine to the USA. This happened because when Reagan started feeding arms to the Contras in the early Eighties, he bought the arms from American gangsters who wanted to be paid in drugs. The drugs therefore had to be bought from Colombia and the Mexicans acted as couriers. A Mexican cartel got established with fulsome help from all levels of the Mexican authorities. All this was relatively controlled until the mid Nineties when the Cartel splintered into rival cartels. Now the cartels themselves are splintering owing to the massive scale of the trade, and in certain places the street gangs no longer know for which cartel they are working. This only works at all because of the most widespread systematic corruption. If I wrote down here on this score what I have gleaned from the book, you probably wouldn't believe it. But Vulliamy suggests that the Border is substantially if not completely bought and paid for. This is a very witty book, it is really a very long conversation. Being an ignorant Brit, I had not known that Ciudad Juarez, the most chaotic city on the border, is the Juarez of 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues'. 'Lost in the rain in Juarez, and it's Eastertime too'. Learning this I put Highway 61 on the CD player one more time and got some insights into the darkness of that whole record.

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