


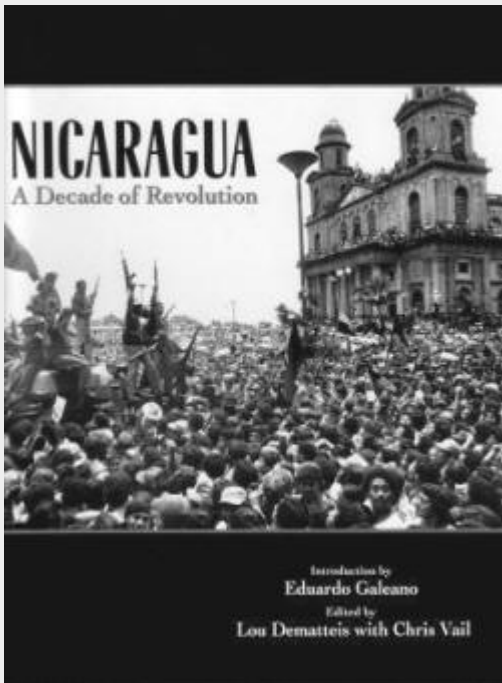
Nicaragua, a decade of revolution /

Lou Dematteis; Chris Vail; Anthony Jenkins

1991 1st ed.

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alone." In drawing rooms festooned with unread highbrow tomes, Wharton's characters acquire culture and learning with the indiscriminate greed of amateur collectors.

In stories like "The Legend," Wharton draws a deeper creative connection between learning and living vicariously. One of the many stories featuring writers, it examines the hazards of the double life. In "The Long Run," a writer discovers to default in love is to default in creativity. Wharton gives to her characters the very habits of denial and retreat the writing of stories cured her of. In this sense, Wharton isn't a dedicated observer just of the American scene but of the human condition. And it's this that these two volumes celebrate. Lewis has compiled what will stand as the single definitive volume

of Wharton's short stories. The subtlety and surety of his choices, an almost novelistic sense of transitions, make this a model anthology. If Brookner's selections concentrate less on the ghost stories, they catch a deeper fright—the phosphorescent sightings of one's past.

In these stories, both editors have embraced Lionel Trilling's definition of manners as "a culture's hum and buzz of implication . . . which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value." If today the minimalist story is the empty sum of our gestures, then in these brief narratives Wharton gives luminous shape to fear, desire and memory. Like the heroine in "Autres Temps . . .," with some brave final clarity we glimpse the tangled knot that is the human heart. □

Strange, Unknowable Things

LARRY BENSKY

BLOOD OF BROTHERS: Life and War in Nicaragua. By Stephen Kinzer. Putnam. 450 pp. \$24.95.

NICARAGUA: A Decade of Revolution. Edited by Lou Dematteis with Chris Vail. Norton. 168 pp. \$39.95.

New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer was for years a man whom people in the United States sympathetic to the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua loved to hate. Week after week, year after year, Kinzer's dispatches accentuated everything that might contribute to the Sandinistas' downfall. While the vicious U.S.-funded and U.S.-instigated *contra* war decimated the Nicaraguan populace and contributed heavily to the ruin of that country's economy, Kinzer habitually stressed the Sandinistas' failures rather than the complexities of the challenges they faced.

Times readers accustomed to a tradition of Latin American reporting more or less in tune with the White House and State Department policy—the execrable work of Shirley Christian in South America and the harassment of Raymond Bonner in El Salvador are two good examples of the *Times* approach—

were hardly surprised by Kinzer's dispatches. Yet there was something naggingly different about Kinzer. As his five-year stint in Nicaragua progressed, it became clear that he was not just getting his Latin America ticket punched on the way to a book contract or behind-the-scenes New York office oblivion. He seemed aware of Nicaragua's language, culture and history and thus able to chart his own course instead of triangulating among the usual agendas of translator, U.S. Embassy and the foreign desk in New York. We now find out, in *Blood of Brothers*, that Kinzer was, after all, greatly troubled by what he witnessed during his tour in Nicaragua, and that he does have a pretty good, though selective, understanding of what went on there.

The story begins with young Stephen, armed with only "an undergraduate degree in history, a desire to see the world, and a vague sense that a journalist's life might suit me," descending upon the ugly, post-earthquake backwater that was Managua in 1976. Anastasio Somoza, last in a dynasty of dictators installed and maintained for four decades by Washington administrations, was continuing to repress a nationwide insurgency through killing and torture. Kinzer, shy in public ("Usually I refrained from asking questions at news conferences"), nevertheless developed a sense that the insurrectionary Nicaragua he was experiencing was a different place from the country with minor problems that "had been created in the Carter administration's imagination." *The Boston Globe* began buying

his articles, and he was soon one of a pack of U.S. reporters on the story. Eventually he opened a Managua bureau for *The New York Times*.

During those exciting years in the late 1970s Kinzer realized that the Sandinistas were a broad-based, historically legitimized, altruistic force whose time had come. Alas, that wasn't all he realized. Although he acknowledges that the Somozas "cruelly and brutally . . . bequeath[ed] to their successors a nation in physical, political, economic, and moral ruin," and that the Sandinistas represented the only alternative, he could never forgive them for acting like revolutionaries. He criticizes what he sees as the "masterful deception" by which the Sandinistas convinced people that they were "dedicated to pluralism, liberty and orderly social progress," and he condemns the Directorate as "a mysterious body, to which no outsiders had access."

Here as elsewhere in *Blood of Brothers*, Kinzer, like many of his colleagues reporting at this very moment in *The New York Times* from various hot spots around the world, displays a craving for the quintessential moment in which revolutionaries either gain legitimacy by adopting the supposedly pristine processes of the United States or head down the slippery slope to the gulag.

There are two usual corollaries to this type of foreign reporting. One is a facile polarity, in which there are seen to be only two sides to every story; as Kinzer says about Nicaragua, each side was fulfilling the other's worst fears. The other is the view that any deviation from the imaginary alchemy that is supposed to transform seething slums into Switzerland must be caused by frighteningly familiar despotic impulses on the part of "messianic, intellectually arrogant" leaders. The authorial voice of *Blood of Brothers* vacillates between these clichés of a *New York Times*man abroad and the admissions of a kinder, gentler Kinzer that "strange and unknowable things" happened all the time in Nicaragua, and that his "search for the truth of what was happening there would never be fully successful, because in such a place there is always more than one truth."

He is at his best in this latter mode, when describing the colossal and depressing difficulties of functioning, even with a *Times* reporter's seemingly infinite expense account, in Managua's heat and ugliness and in the insect-infested jungles; or when writing about the effects of the *contra* war and Sandinista ineptitude

Larry Bensky produced the PBS documentary *Nicaragua: These Same Hands in 1981* and covered the 1990 Nicaraguan elections for *Pacifica Radio* and *The Nation*.

in the out-of-the-way communities he braved the elements (and the *contras*) to visit; or when sharply dissecting the insane fabrications by which Ronald Reagan and his knight, Sir Oliver North, distorted the real situation in Nicaragua in order to justify their vendetta against that suffering land. On the other hand, Kinzer is at his worst not only when applying the inflexible polarities of geopolitics but also in his not-so-subtle annoyance with Nicaragua, where he views his assignment retroactively without "any special warmth."

Nicaraguans "often treated me as though I might somehow be able to heal their ills or relieve their tribulations," he observes, without recognizing that they may have been right. He exults in minor instances of bribery—a few packs of cigarettes could get him through roadblocks—or what are, to him, harmless acts of deception; for example, he invented an organization called "Rice for Peace" by which to charm his way to places he wanted to visit. He shows no understanding of how his actions relate to the misery he elsewhere so eloquently describes, or of the humanity of a Nicaraguan teenager desperate for a smoke or a bag of rice or a sense of solidarity from abroad—a kid who might, in that country's astonishing (and still evolving) political process, become the mayor of his community in the not-so-distant future.

Kinzer was hardly alone among the foreign press corps in misunderstanding Nicaraguans' enthusiasms, scorning their search for new structures and almost incidentally manipulating their misery to get a basically one-sided story. What made him especially dangerous was the obvious influence of his pieces in reinforcing the skewed version of events in Nicaragua that the Reagan-North-Abrams cabal was peddling to Congress and the media. Such one-sidedness is ever-present in *Blood of Brothers*, even though it is much nuanced by Kinzer's reflections on his experience. He characterizes the 1984 election, for example, as a "charade," without bothering to make reference to the Latin American Studies Association's extensive legitimization of that event or to the international parliamentary delegations' similar endorsements. Kinzer fails to make the connection between candidate Arturo Cruz's withdrawal from the race and the presence of that worthy candidate on the C.I.A.'s payroll at the time, though he does mention forty pages later, in passing and in another connection, that Cruz "like other senior *contras* was

receiving a handsome CIA retainer."

The now-notorious 1984 bombing of former Sandinista leader Edén Pastora's La Penca press conference is reported without any reference to the extensive investigation conducted by one of the victims, Tony Avirgan, and his wife, Martha Honey; or to the ongoing Costa Rican judicial and legislative inquiries that implicate a number of United States citizens in the affair. In fact, Kinzer describes *contra* activities in Costa Rica without mentioning John Hull, Rob Owen or Richard Secord—or, for that matter, Joseph Fernandez, the C.I.A. station chief. Although Kinzer makes it clear that the *contras* were a bloodthirsty lot militarily and were ruled by ambition and selfishness politically, he fails to flesh out that portrait by any reference to their unsavory financial manipulations and alleged drug dealing. Nor does he explore the question of George Bush's involvement in sustaining them.

As might be expected, Kinzer is especially eloquent when describing the Sandinistas' cruel and counterproductive treatment of the Atlantic Coast populations in the early 1980s. Although he does show how that policy was reversed, he neglects to bring the story up to date by describing the arrangements for autonomy that the Sandinistas negotiated there—arrangements that were opposed by the U.S.-supported UNO coalition and its presidential candidate, Violeta Chamorro, but that apparently satisfied sufficient numbers of people to win the Sandinistas a significant presence in the autonomous legislatures (thirty-eight out of ninety-one seats).

Kinzer was in the country while the new Nicaraguan Constitution was being debated in hundreds of meetings and negotiating sessions in 1986—a more open, democratic process than the framing of our own—but he does not mention that document or the process that produced it in *Blood of Brothers*. Nor is there any mention of the hundreds of Cara Al Pueblo ("Face to Face With the People") sessions held by President Daniel Ortega and others, or of the Sandinista popular groups that, with varying degrees of success, provided dignity, organization and mutual support to artists, teachers, health workers and women for the first time in Nicaraguan history.

Discussing such democratic and empowering efforts, however experimental, remains outside the agenda for Kinzer and *The New York Times*. It is hardly surprising to learn that the ultimate les-

son Kinzer draws from his Nicaraguan experience is that failing to defer to the "principles of free enterprise" or to consult the "moral influence of the Catholic bishops" assaults the human spirit, which will inevitably "rebel and say no" to such social alternatives as Sandinismo.

The photographs and text in Lou Dematteis and Chris Vail's *Nicaragua: A Decade of Revolution* both complement and contradict Kinzer's narrative. Overwhelmingly focused on the ghastly effects of the mercenary war, the book's 141 pictures by forty-seven photographers are a powerful year-by-year portrait of the country's agony. There is a brief, useful summary of each year's events by the London *Guardian's* former senior correspondent in Central America, Anthony Jenkins. And in three essays the great Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano notes that for people in countries like Nicaragua, for "prisoners of need, doomed to isolation and violence," capitalism is "not a dream to be made a reality, but a nightmare come true."

Galeano writes that the Sandinistas' electoral reversal in 1990 made him feel like "a child lost in the storm." He criticizes the "theoreticians of disenchantment," which would be a perfect characterization of Kinzer. And Galeano advocates a renewal of faith that "the human condition is not doomed to selfishness and the obscene pursuit of money." Experiencing the extraordinary photographs collected in *Nicaragua: A Decade of Revolution*, one can only share once again the sadness of that nation—and hope that he's right. □

BOOK NOTE.

ERIC LOTT

I AM ELVIS: A Guide to Elvis Impersonators. By American Graphic Systems, Inc. Pocket Books. 128 pp. \$8.95.

Reports of Elvis Presley's death, as the tabloids routinely remind us, have been greatly exaggerated. Nowhere is this clearer than in *I Am Elvis: A Guide to Elvis Impersonators*. This apparently sober document records the bios and vital statistics—birthdate, height/weight, astrological sign and agent's phone number—of

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Sandinista Revolution. Before entering into this topic, we should state that this article is merely historical, without any relation with the Nicaraguan political world. Every year on July 19, hundreds of people from all over the country gather at Plaza La Fe (also known as Plaza de la Revoluci3n) in Managua to commemorate a historical and inspiring event: the fall of the militarized Somoza family dictatorship. This family ruled the country in a harsh and unscrupulous way for more than four decades. The dynasty was overthrown after the National Sandinista Revolution, which took place when people Nicaragua's conservatives believe the revolution led to a loss of moral values. Even though abandonment by husbands, single motherhood, and common-law marriages had long been common, women now felt freer to leave their husbands or boyfriends. Young people stayed out at night, and, like Nelson, went on volunteer missions away from their families. This ranged from giving a Lada—the small Soviet-made car whose doorhandles always fell off—to public workers in compensation for a decade of hard work for dismal wages, to more serious abuses. Fearful that war might break out again, people hoarded rice and beans, or hid weapons. In the end, the transition was peaceful, if a bit surreal. The Nicaraguan Revolution was a decades-long process meant to liberate the small Central American country from both U.S. imperialism and the repressive Somoza dictatorship. It began in the early 1960s with the founding of the Sandinista National Liberation front (FSLN), but didn't truly ramp up until the mid-1970s. Event End Date: The Sandinistas lost power in a February 1990 election, considered to be the end of the Nicaraguan Revolution. Other Significant Date: July 19, 1979, when the Sandinistas succeeded in ousting the Somoza dictatorship and took power. Location: Nicaragua. Nicaragua Before 1960. The Nicaraguan Revolution (Spanish: Revoluci3n Nicarag4ense or Revoluci3n Popular Sandinista) encompassed the rising opposition to the Somoza dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, the violent campaign led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) to oust the dictatorship in 1978–79, the subsequent efforts of the FSLN to govern Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990, and the Contra War, which was waged between the FSLN-led government of Nicaragua and the United States-backed Contras from 1981–1990. The MANAGUA, Nicaragua—Journalists follow the news. So when peace came to Central America at the beginning of the 1990s, I knew it was time for me to leave. The story there that had dominated front pages and nightly news for more than a decade dissipated almost overnight. In any case, I was ready to expand my work from Latin America and the Caribbean to more distant frontiers and Claudia, my Nicaraguan wife, was glad to escape the pressure cooker of a country mired in perpetual crisis. So we moved to Miami, a blend of developed and developing countries, where I still could cover major national and