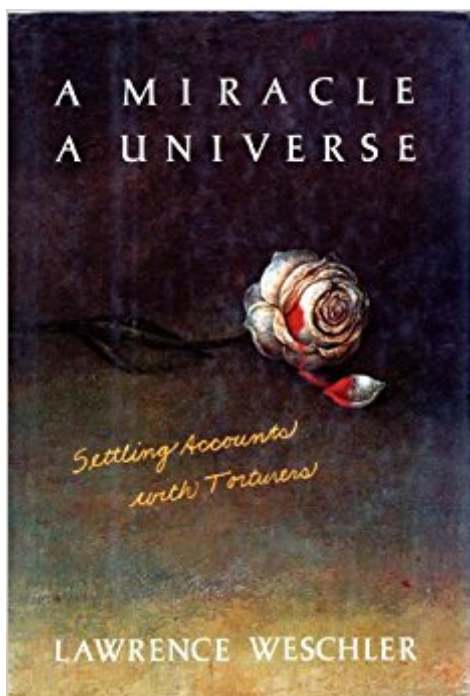


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A Miracle, A Universe: Settling Accounts With Torturers



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

An incredible book that describes a few horrific cultures of dictatorship that will hopefully be forever unrecognizable to people in the United States. The most fascinating parts of the book are the theories of how the dictatorships came to be (the Tupamaros in Uruguay and the backlash of the military, etc.); even more incredible is how the leaders of the respective dictatorships stayed in power out of necessary compromises with the government (some are still in power, which will be difficult to swallow after reading this book). It is, in the end, a hopeful book with a warning:

"Nunca más!" The book asks "how do you come to terms with those that tortured?" (especially in the incredible situation of passing someone who tortured you in the street, described by someone in the book) Another point the author makes is that there can be forgiveness after such horror, and if there's not there may just be more torture. A very worthwhile read, but not for the squeamish. Lastly, the book provides a good introduction to a much neglected country: Uruguay. There are very few accounts in English of Uruguay, and this is probably the best I've seen. I have also visited Uruguay; it is a fascinating country and well worth a visit. You get a real appreciation for the friendliness of the people after reading what a lot of them went through during "la dictadura."

This book reads like a work of journalism. It was good because it explained the economic and social conditions that spawn totalitarian regimes and military takeovers. Very good bibliography if you want to further your study. Good Interviews. Very Thorough and Fair. More than I would have been. Names, Dates, and the history behind the story is always given.

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. In an effort to hasten reconciliation (or so they claimed), the civilian government declared an amnesty for those imprisoned for subversion under the old regime; later this amnesty was extended to those who tortured their political enemies. A group of concerned citizens began an exhausting referendum campaign to put the second amnesty to a vote. Weschler makes their task as exciting as a Hollywood thriller, without ever losing sight of the horror and tragedy which had been their inspiration. It's a beautifully structured, patient, and gorgeously written piece of work. An afterword makes some more general claims about the need to speak up on the subject of torture. 'The scream that comes welling out of the torture chamber is thus double -- the body calling out to the soul, the self calling out to others -- and in both cases, it goes unanswered. Torture's stark lesson is precisely that enveloping silence: it aims to take that silence and introject it back into its victim, to replace the flame of subjectivity with an abject, hollow void.' It is through reading books like Weschler's, and discussing and acting on his suggestions and the example of those in Brazil and Uruguay and elsewhere, that this silence can be partly drowned out. The book deserves -- indeed, demands -- a wide readership.

"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. Long sentences are used to give the reader ample amounts of information and link ideas together. The style is constant and his voice as a writer is strong and his message for acknowledgement is loudly heard. The accounts bring light from the darkness and exposes the horrors of torture, the torturers, and the need for acknowledgement. Together the content and style work to portray the detailed trials of procuring justice. Bringing about acknowledgement becomes the key to overcoming torture. With the government, society, and the world seeing the pain and understanding the wrongs committed, the victims rise above their experiences and restore their integrity. The author's voice adds realness to the content, creating connection. His style is unwavering. Overall, this novel sheds light on a topic once hidden in secrecy. His words inspire compassion and the need to prevent these types of injustices from occurring again.

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