

Silence on the Mountain



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"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 some 200,000 people, the vast majority of whom died (or were "disappeared") at the hands of the U.S.-backed military government. Written by Daniel Wilkinson, a young human rights worker, the story begins in 1993, when the author decides 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 whose solution requires Wilkinson to dig up the largely unwritten history of the country's recent civil war, following its roots back to a land reform movement that was derailed by a U.S.-sponsored military coup in 1954 and to the origins of a plantation system that put Guatemala's Mayan Indians to work picking coffee beans for the American and European markets. Decades of terror-inspired fear have led the Guatemalans to adopt a survival strategy of silence so complete it verges on collective amnesia. The author'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 are shown the anatomy of a thwarted revolution that has relevance not only to Guatemala but to countless places around the world where terror has been used as a political tool.

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目录:

[Silence on the Mountain_ 下载链接1](#)

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[Silence on the Mountain_ 下载链接1](#)

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[Silence on the Mountain_下载链接1](#)