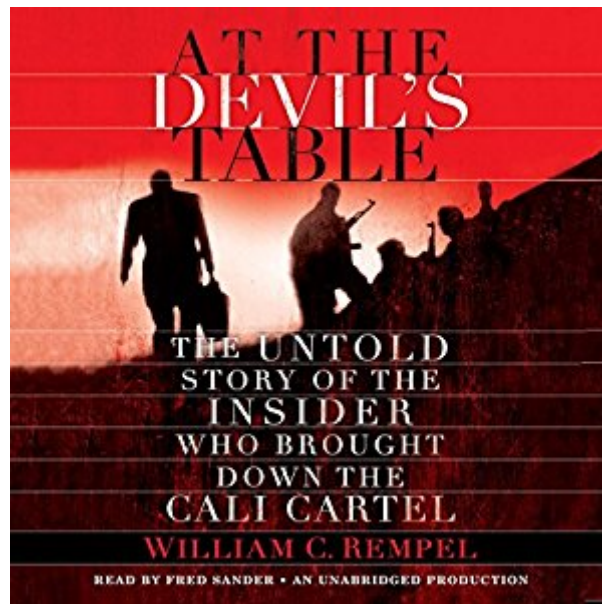


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At The Devil's Table: The Untold Story Of The Insider Who Brought Down The Cali Cartel



Synopsis

In this riveting and relentless nonfiction thriller, award-winning investigative reporter William C. Rempel tells the harrowing story of former Cali cartel insider Jorge Salcedo, an ordinary man facing an extraordinary dilemma—a man forced to risk everything to escape the powerful and treacherous Cali crime syndicate. Colombia in the 1990s is a country in chaos, as a weak government battles guerrilla movements and narco-traffickers, including the notorious Pablo Escobar and his rivals in the Cali cartel. Enter Jorge Salcedo, a part-time soldier, a gifted engineer, a respected businessman and family man—and a man who despises Pablo Escobar for patriotic and deeply personal reasons. He is introduced to the godfathers of the Cali cartel, who are at war with Escobar and desperately want their foe dead. With mixed feelings, Jorge agrees to help them. Once inside, Jorge rises to become head of security for Miguel Rodríguez Orejuela, principal godfather of the \$7-billion-a-year Cali drug cartel. Jorge tries to turn a blind eye to the violence, corruption, and brutality that surround him, and he struggles privately to preserve his integrity, even as he is drawn deeper into the web of cartel operations. Then comes an order from the godfathers that he can't obey—but can't refuse. Jorge realizes that his only way out is to bring down the biggest, richest crime syndicate of all time. Thus begins a heart-pumping roller-coaster ride of intensifying peril. Secretly aided by a pair of young American DEA agents, Jorge races time and cartel assassins to extract damaging evidence, help capture the fugitive godfather, and save the life of a witness targeted for murder. Through it all, death lurks a single misstep away. William C. Rempel is the only reporter with access to this story and to Jorge, who remains in hiding somewhere in the United States—even the author doesn't know where—but has revealed his experience in gripping detail. Salcedo's is the story of one extraordinary, ordinary man forced to risk everything to end a nightmare of his own making.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Within its intended limits of investigative journalism, this is a first-rate book and I strongly recommend it. It is a narrative review of the Cali drug cartel during the 1990s. It does not address the wider context of the global drug trade, the policy issues, or the mechanisms of the cocaine trade. These are subordinate to the viewpoint of the central character, Jorge Salcedo, an insider close to the heads of the cartel family and who became their electronic security expert. He portrays himself as a man who had noble intentions in helping the Cali gang fight back against Pablo Escobar, the notorious and almost unbelievably brutal head of the dominant Medellin cartel. He avoided involvement in the cocaine trade and its inherent stream of murders and kept his hands fairly clean. Little by little, he became so entrapped that he was locked into the family as its tightly controlled minion, with death the routine punishment for any effort to "resign." Finally, as the U.S. government began to disrupt the cartel, despite the widespread corruption in the police, military, government and judiciary - the family even bought itself the Presidential election and seems to have had around a third of Cali's public officials on retainer -- Salcedo is able to make his break and help a pair of DEA agents capture the head of the cartel family. The story is his recollection of events as revealed to a well-respected LA Times reporter over a number of years, almost entirely by phone - Salcedo is well tucked away in the Federal Witness Protection program - and supplemented with other material, including from the many, many trials that he and other key insiders provided. It's a complex and compelling story that makes Goodfellas, the Sopranos and even the Godfather look almost quaint. My only hesitation is in believing that Jorge was quite as much the relative innocent he claims to be. There seem to me to be three main questions that a review of any book in this style and topic needs to address: 1. Is it substantive? 2. Is it reliable? 3. How interesting is it? All in all, it rates 4-5 stars in each of these regards. Substantive: This has all the strengths of, say, a New York Times series or Atlantic article. It's well crafted, measured and full of appropriate detail. It does not try to go beyond reporting and from my own limited but still reasonably extensive reading on the subject (plus my work in Colombia during these years) it has the ring of authenticity and carefully builds its narrative with evidence and example rather than assertion and interpretation. It manages to be solid without being academic - there is no need for footnotes and references but I still had the

sense of this representing the best of the now old tradition of responsible reporting and backed with plenty of solid data. There are only a few instances where thoughts are put into a character's head or the adjectives start piling up in purple prose. Reliability: This is crucial. The essence of the story is that it is a factual and dispassionate laying out of what happened. There is no reason to read it unless the account can be trusted. The Devil's Table scores highly here. There is no effort to jazz up the narrative or embellish dramatic incidents or characters - there are plenty of opportunities to have done so, with everyday psychothugs, femmes fatales, venal colonels, and a host of figures with all the charm, moral sensitivity and compassion of Paulie Walnuts in the Sopranos. Interesting: The book rates fairly highly here, though I have a few cavils. The difficulty in presenting an investigatory report in this style is to find the balance between dispassionate and careful laying out of fact versus colorful presentation and pacing. I enjoyed the book and it held my attention through its 300 pages but even another 30 would have been too long. The detail that makes it credible largely covers very ordinary matters: building layouts, setting up security, meetings and conversations that are often ordinary in themselves. The author is very skillful in finding the right balance of presentation but this is in no way a spellbinder - nor is it intended to be. The world of the cartels - Escobar in Medellin, the Rodriguez Orejuela family in Cali, El Chapo Guzman's Sinaloa gang, the Beltran-Levy Zetas - is monstrous and intruding on our society everywhere. It seems to me to be a subject that the responsible citizen needs to know about. Traffik/Traffic, the two films based on the same script, are an excellent fictional capturing of the dynamics of the drug trade; alas, they appeared ten years apart and there was barely a need to update any detail between 1989 when Traffik appeared and 2000 when Benicio Del Toro so brilliantly starred in Traffic; the "war on drugs" is a lost cause. Now, Monterrey, one of the finest cities to work in in the world with one of its best university systems, is under siege as the Gulf and Zeta cartels use kidnapping, random shootings and mass killings to gain control of Mexico's wealthiest region. The Devil's Table provides insights into the nature of the cartel system, the pervasive corruption and violence they depend on and create, and the immense challenges it poses to even stem the tide let alone win the "war." It's horrific. The Devil's Table is a reliable, interesting and resonant introduction to everyday life in the cartels. I think you will find it well worth your time. It is a fine piece of work.

I was floored by this insider's story of a Colombian drug cartel. I didn't know much about drug cartels other than being ruthless, but At the Devil's Table really brought to light the true livelihood of a life in the drug cartels. Rempel's book took many years in the making as he slowly pieced together the life of Jorge Salcedo as a member of the Cali Cartel. At times you wonder if Salcedo is trying to

save face, trying to make himself not a part of the Cali Cartel, at least the violent part of it, but then you immediately brush it aside and accept Rempel's story for what it is: a career man sucked in to the life of violence, unable to extricate himself. What is truly astonishing is how important he was to the Cali Cartel's main boss, Miguel Rodriguez, as his chief of security, and the amount of intel he was able to take in just from being close to the big man and trusted and accepted by everyone else. Of course he wasn't privy to all the details of the cartel, such as most of the trafficking as well as the violence and death that was meted out as though it was just another day in the park. But what we do get is a man who knows intimate details of those that the Cali cartel interacted with, either through first hand or through a second hand source. As his importance grew within the cartel so did the responsibilities expected of him, which is where he drew the line at murder. Rempel makes a point to tell the reader that Salcedo knew he was taking part in dubious acts, like plotting the murder of Pablo Escobar, or aiding and abetting serious crimes. Made a point of showing that he always justified it in his head, by playing the hero figure or protecting lives and families. So he is not without his blame for the actions he took within the cartel, but he at least looks like the most honest, respectful and honorable man among thieves and murderers. Rempel's account of Jorge Salcido's life from 1989-1995 takes part during the pivotal cocaine wars between the rival cartels, and thus is an excellent history and first person account of that time period in Colombia. I would definitely recommend *At the Devil's Table* to everyone. In fact I enjoyed it so much I am going to search out other books of the drug cartels and read further on the subject. A definite recommend. 5 stars.

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