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From the back of the book:

"Acclaimed around the world and a national best-seller, this is the definitive work on Che Guevara, the dashing rebel whose epic dream was to end poverty and injustice in Latin America and the developing world through armed revelation. Jon Lee Anderson's biography traces Che's extraordinary life, from his comfortable Argentine upbringing to the battlefields of the Cuban revolution, from the halls of power in Castro's government to his failed campaign in the Congo and assassination in the Bolivian Jungle.

Anderson has had unprecedented access to the personal archives maintained by Guevara's widow and carefully guarded Cuban government documents. He has conducted extensive interviews with Che's comrades-some of whom speak here for the first time-and with CIA men and Bolivian officers who hunted him down. Anderson broke the story of where Guevara's body was buried, which led to the exhumation and state burial of the bones. Many of the details of Che's life have long been cloaked in secrecy and intrigue. Meticulously researched and full of exclusive information, Che Guevara illuminates as never before this mythic figure who embodied the high-water mark of revolutionary communism as a force in history."

Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life Details

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From Reader Review Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life for online ebook

Christopher says

I did not read Che because I'm a wannabe socialist or guerrilla. I read Che because I generally like biographies. I think it is good for twenty-somethings who are asking "what are my values and how will I commit to them in my life?" to read biographies of people who have done that whether their values are similar or different.

What I loved about this book was not only the lens on the fascinating history of Che's life and especially the Cuban revolution, but the dozens of journal excerpts from Che. I mean what a deeply reflective thinker. What a passionate soul. A true inspiration is Che Guevara to one who needs a boost of courage to take the risk of following what they believe in, even if it means sacrificing the easy road of a lot of comfort and security in one's life.

Chrissie says

I highly recommend this book. All have heard of the icon Che Guevara (May 14, 1928 – October 9, 1967). This book shows you who he really was. His character, his weaknesses and strengths, his life-philosophy and goals, all of this is covered in this book. It is meticulously researched and full of exclusive information, for example previously unavailable information gathered from his second wife. It follows his life chronologically through to his death. After his death, in the epilogue, the lives of his siblings, parents, children and wives are chronicled too. This book is comprehensive. His characteristics are exemplified through his deeds. You are not merely told that he is “a man of principle”, but you are shown how his deeds make him that. I admire Che Guevara and yet he went too far. At least in my opinion. He certainly wanted to help others. He certainly demanded high standards of others, but he demanded the same of himself.

This book is also about the ideals of socialism. It is about communism and how the Russian and Chinese diverge. It is about the guerrilla warfare. The book is about how these political ideologies spread in Latin America. You learn of how these ideologies played out in all of Latin America, not just in the country of his birth, Argentina, not just in Cuba, but in Nicaragua and Guatemala and Peru and Bolivia and Mexico. The history of all of Latin America from the 30s through the 60s is delineated. Why? Because he had a hand in much of it. You learn of the fight for socialism in the Congo too.

I am usually not interested in politics. But Che had such devotion to his principles that his enthusiasm spreads and you understand why he does what he does, even if it all goes too far in the end. The author made me understand how Che reasoned. And Che knew his own faults. You see in this book how people change and how they don't change. How wonderful ideals can get all messed up.

I feel I know who Che Guevara is after reading this book. I learned a lot about Latin American history. Through his life I became very interested in this history. There are a lot of names and historical facts that will disappear from my head, but something will fasten.

I listened to an audiobook. The narration, by Armando Durán, was superb. He could read the facts with an appropriate tone. Equally well he made the reader understand Che's emotions. Beware, this is a very long

audiobook - 36 hours and 48 minutes! I found all of it compelling. To really know who Che is you must hear the details. These facts are not boring. The pronunciation of the Spanish names I found difficult to "spell out". I couldn't even see them because I had no book in front of me and they are pronounced fluently. Nevertheless I did remember most of who all these people were. Don't ask me to write out their names because I cannot, but I did recognize who was who as I listened.

You must know that Che was really called Ernesto. Che means "you, there"! He used to say that all the time to others. That is why others started calling him that. He was trained as a doctor. When he was young he was not at all interested in politics. He had terrible asthma. Can you imagine fighting as a guerrilla with asthma in humid climates? These are just a smattering of some interesting tidbits.

No, I don't believe in communism. No, I don't believe in guerrilla warfare. I still admire Che Guevara. He is a fascinating person. If he didn't know something, he set himself to learn it. I will put an end to this.....I cannot go on and on telling you about him. I highly recommend this book, but give yourself the time to read it properly.

Jason says

I bought this book because I really had little to no idea who this guy was. I knew he was involved in the Cuban revolution, and that his face adorns thousands of T-shirts around the world, but that was it.

What really motivated me to finally sit down and read this book was something I saw in a Chinese restaurant about two or three months ago. I was sitting in the restaurant, waiting for my food when a twelve-year-old kid came in, wearing a Che Guevara shirt. I wondered if the kid even knew anything about the history or what that shirt entails. Was it simply a cool symbol of rebellion to him, as it is to thousands of others? To me, a kid wearing that shirt seemed rude, somehow. Ignorant. But these judgements I gave so easily only made me a hypocrite; I had no real knowledge myself.

Jon Lee Anderson's opus takes us on Che Guevara's adventurous life from birth up until his death in the Bolivian mountains. Exhaustively researched, the timeline is flawless, from what I can tell. But what makes this book, and Che's life, so interesting, is the man himself: Che Guevara.

As a Capitalist Imperialist myself, an individual Che would have enjoyed shooting, I never thought I'd admire a communist. But there is a lot to admire in Che. Up until his death, he was a man who stood by his word. He walked the walk and talked the talk. If he was going to be a communist in a role of leadership, he wasn't about to abuse that power and live in a palace. He lived amongst the people, and expected no less from others in positions of power.

There was also a lot to hate. Che was a man bent on using violence to create social change within the world. Although this theory may hold *some* truth, in my opinion, the things Che wanted to accomplish in his lifetime were just insane. I'm thinking, for those who've read this work, his goal of many Vietnam-like wars, of personally provoking World War III, and his want of a global Marxist/communist government, thereby eradicating democracy, or capitalist imperialism.

I live in country where I'm allowed to read what I want, and think for myself, so I'm glad these things never came to pass. My country's politics are very flawed, but so is communism, in my humble opinion. It is also

my opinion that there's no government that can operate perfectly, but that is another topic. Che was, however, loved by many people. His very presence in history was enough to spark even my own affection, as he was a rare and most interesting individual.

I highly recommend reading this, especially to those who've either worn the shirt, or have wanted to, but know nothing about the actual man. And remember, it is much a more attractive character trait to educate yourself before making judgements.

K.D. Absolutely says

This 700+ page biography of Che Guevara is definitely definitive. While reading it, I had a feeling that I was taking a Rizal course in college. The story included all the years and phases of Che's life as an asthmatic child with his small group of playmates, as a teenager traveling the countryside of Argentina in his bicycle, his unrequited first love, his funny years as a medical student and finally his life as communist revolutionary. When I picked the book in December last year, I said that I would like to know the man because I have been seeing his image printed on cool t-shirts since I was a kid. A few years ago, I bought and viewed some parts of the movie *Motorcycle Diaries* but I did not know that it was about the teenager Che Guevara. After reading the novel, I think I know everything that I need to know about the guy. Thanks to this well-researched book of Jon Lee Anderson. I look forward to reading his other books like the one about the Fall of Baghdad that he wrote only a few years ago.

Did I like Che Guevara as a person? Definitely, yes. He stood to what he believed was right. Did I believe he was right? Well, had I read this before the fall of Berlin Wall or the disintegration of USSR, maybe it could have been an emphatic yes. Being an asthmatic child, he spent most of his time reading and the fact that the Guevara's home was full of books (to the point that there were no more chairs for guest to sit on) helped him pursue this hobby. Philosophy and literature (including poetry) are his greatest interest and this broadened his thinking and developed his critical reasoning. Then his sojourns in the countryside opened his eyes to the injustices to marginalized people in Argentina. With Fidel Castro by his side, he succeeded in Cuba but failed in Argentina, Honduras and Bolivia leading to his death on October 9, 1967 (I was only 4 year old then).

I don't say that it was just a waste. He was able to serve the poor as a doctor in the years in the mountain. He was able to train and inculcate in the minds of many young men and women in those countries the true meaning of one's love to his/her country. However, now that the Lenin-Marx models were proven as not as effective, I have a second thought that his short life (he died in the age of 39). He could have succeeded more as an allergy scientist.

On the other hand, with your image printed on shirts being worn by young people even 40 years after your death, is it not an achievement enough?

Joseph says

Che, thug or hero? Many in the West are quick to say thug. Che was a true believer in liberating the underclass and freeing the countries from economic domination. He was critical of the Soviet's system of

privilege and critical of those in post revolutionary Cuba should privilege. As far as being a thug he was quite tame compared to US supported dictators Somoza, Duvalier, Trujillo, and later Pinochet and Duarte. Support for Somoza loyalists brought more violence in Nicaragua but were supported by the US as of being of the same blood of our founding fathers --the Contras. The United States has a long history of promoting dictatorships instead of democracy.

Che watched the overthrow of the legally and freely elected government of Arbenz in Guatemala. The US supported the overthrow and even participated in it. What good is the a northern neighbor who speaks of democracy, but overthrows it at the same time. He had good reason not to trust the US.

Great book, balanced, and enlightening.

ka?yap says

Over the years as Che Guevara was commodified, he became the most familiar figure and yet a misunderstood and unknown personality. He became a brand that was used to sell everything from t-shirts and mugs to canned beer. In all this commodification, Che's life and what he stood for got lost. Who was this extraordinary man who gave up his privilege and everything he cherished and dedicated his life to an idea and died for it? This is a great biography that gives him a historical context and brings him to life.

Che is one of the most important and charismatic figures of the human struggle against injustice and oppression. This biography is meticulously detailed and comprehensive. John Lee Anderson takes us from the social conditions of his childhood, his family whose independent spirit will be a great influence on him, his medical studies, to his famous motorcycle journeys and his later journeys across the Americas that awakened his political and social consciousness as he became a dedicated Marxist. The Cuban revolution after which he became the principal architect of its economic direction, and his return to Guerrilla warfare after he decided that the Cuban revolution was on the right path that eventually led to his death in Bolivia. The death that would give him such an enduring romantic legacy. The final section of this book has many poignant moments.

Che was selfless, strong-willed, honest, a lover of learning who constantly read books, and was totally dedicated to the cause of struggle against imperialism. While Fidel and Che shared the same goals and ideals, Fidel was a wily politician who presented a different face to the public from his private self and Che was honest to a fault who always spoke his mind. The author brings out both the passionate romantic and the cold rationale side of him.

As a guerilla he was a man embroiled in a violent struggle and was no saint. He was a great tactician and a charismatic leader who attracted undying loyalty from many. He led an ascetic life and expected everyone to live up to his standards. He was a strict disciplinarian. He was also very idealistic and utopian which shows in the unbridled faith and optimism that he showed even when people around him were failing him.

As an administrator he was the driving force behind Cuba's land reforms and its successful health and literacy programs. As a Marxist, he wanted to diversify and industrialise the Cuban economy. In this he was critical of the soviet model and was more of a Maoist.

He was a dedicated internationalist and he held that socialism could only be successful with the creation of the "New Man". He believed that a change in consciousness should be simultaneous with the new material foundations. I think his idea of the "New socialist man" is his most important contribution to Marxist theory.

He argued that capitalism produces incomplete alienated individuals that only a true socialist society enables a man to become a complete individual.

An excellent and inspirational biography of a truly selfless revolutionary. He dedicated his life to what he believed in and he ultimately died for it.

Diane Wallace says

Great read! it has depth plus it was intricately researched and well written/balanced...saw the good and bad...highly recommend...(paperback!)

Selby says

A great biography about a generally misunderstood figurehead. I have seen too much crap with Guevara's face on it; tees, bandanas, medallions, pencil holders, etc. His persona has been so commodified it is important to understand who he was and what he represents. The book does not shy away from his dark moments; rape, murder, or his phenomenal ones; adrenaline shots into the heart, voluntary poverty. A fantastic book.

Amin Dorosti says

این کتاب یکی از بهترین و جامع‌ترین کتاب‌ها در مورد چ‌گوارا است. نویسنده به خوبی به جنبه‌های مختلف زندگی او پرداخته و به شما کمک می‌کند تا او را به عنوان یک انسان کامل ببینید، نه فقط یک نماد. این کتاب برای کسانی که می‌خواهند بفهمند که چرا چ‌گوارا برای بسیاری از افراد الهام‌بخش بوده، بسیار ارزشمند است. اگر به تاریخ و مبارزه برای آزادی علاقه دارید، این کتاب را حتماً بخوانید.

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Jareed says

“Shoot, coward, you are only going to kill a man.”
-Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara’s last words* (Anderson, 1991:735)

Ernesto 'Che' Guevara de la Serna

Those words make me shudder. And one will wonder, who this man is, that in his irrepressible idealism enlivened in clandestine activities and political conspiracies, dare deprive death of his satisfaction, for indeed decades later, *Comandante Che*, is now heroically revered.

Born Ernesto Guevara de la Serna, Che Guevara, was, unlike the ideology he died for, born in an affluent family of landed Argentinean elites, albeit a family on a sole route certain to lead them to modest living later on. Ernestito, as he was fondly called, was born with asthma, and throughout his life, this will limit and define him.

At 7, barred by his recurring and debilitating asthma attacks from engaging in strenuous activities reinforced by a concrete mother-son relationship, Ernesto developed a love for literature. He was, in most instances in his life, a voracious reader.

The Young Che groomed in an elite society

At 16, *“Everything began with literature for him” (89)*. At this age he has quoted Freud and Nietzsche in his journal. He read Jack London, Bertrand Russell, Faulkner, Kafka, Camus, and Sartre. Most often, he said, Neruda was his favorite.

At 25, While in Medical School, Ernesto has traveled a sizeable part of South America first through his bicycle later outfitted with a motor and later with a motorbike. The travels are of monumental importance, in this austere travels characterized by the occasional begging of food and hitch-hiking rides, Che met the people of South America and for the first time saw the world through their forgotten faces and unheard voices. Indeed he writes, *“The person who wrote these notes died upon stepping once again onto Argentine soil. The person who edits and polishes them, me, is no longer. At least, I am not the person I was before. The vagabonding through ‘America’ has changed me more than I thought.” (167)*

Che with his faithful bicycle he used for travelling

At 27, He meets Fidel and Raul Castro, who will later on invite him in, to which he giddily joined, the July 26 Movement for the liberation of Cuba from Batista. This critical step launches Ernesto away from his paradoxical behavior of complete apathy and radical declamations that characterized his earlier years. *“I will be with the people, and i know it because I see it etched in the night that I, the eclectic dissector of doctrines and psychoanalyst of dogmas, howling like one possessed, will assault the barricades or trenches, will bathe my weapon in blood and, mad with fury, will slit the throat of any enemy who falls into my hands.” (201)*

At 32, The July 26 Movement finds daylight, Batista flees the country, and a newly established revolutionary government with Fidel Castro as the head pronounced Che Guevara as a Cuban Citizen by birth. Che helps implement land reforms and literacy improvement projects in the liberated Cuba.

Che with Castro

At 36, He left his ministerial position, commander's rank, and family to spark off new revolutions.

At 39, Che Guevara was caught in Bolivia, while tied down and kept as a prisoner, he was shot to death, his hands were cut-off, and buried in an unmarked mass grave. The remains were exhumed and later found through a confession of a retired Bolivian General who came clean to this book's author.

Jon Lee Anderson made a splendid job writing this biography. He was an international investigative reporter, war correspondent and staff writer for The New Yorker. His fastidiousness and training as an investigative writer was thoroughly employed in an outstanding manner. This is a well researched work grounded on extensive and exclusive primary sources that were given to Anderson when he approached Che Guevara's widow, Aleida March, a distinction other written biographies lack that inevitably strips them of some semblance of true portrayal of Che's life if not sheer outright veracity that led to biographies that have often resulted to sanctimonious and romanticized accounts.

Anderson's narrative is fluid and light. He presents the social milieu operative in Che's environment and in so doing, the reader is made to understand how this helped shape the man. Anderson intermittently interjects his intuitive comments on the narrative which are always rational if not factual. What I have come to appreciate the most was Anderson's tone in writing which was, if not totally objective, was not defined by a 'western' bias in the least.

This is a great piece of work not only because of Anderson's capacity and technical aspects in writing but more so in what it has substantially achieved. He was able to peel layers and layers of laudatory accounts and legends on this icon and revealed the man within.

Did I enjoy reading this biography? Definitely, yes!

Did I come to know Ernesto 'Che' Guevara? Yes!

Will I recommend this? This is the book one must read to know Che Guevara.

*Accounts vary on this, and the incident itself has attained an exalted position, sometimes mythologized. Other accounts point that this is Che's last **written** word as contained in his Bolivian diary.

This review, along with my other reviews, has been cross-posted at [imbookedindefinitely](#)

SAM says

I doubt they'll ever be a more definitive account of Che Guevara's life than this epic tome. Jon Lee Anderson lived in Cuba whilst researching this book and it shows with the exhaustive amount of detail.

A Revolutionary Life is infinitely quotable. I could probably write ten blog pages with the musings of Che Guevara but I won't because it wouldn't make sense. But I am going to post a couple during this review starting with:

"I have sworn before a picture of the old and mourned comrade Stalin that I won't rest until I see these capitalist octopuses annihilated"

I don't mind admitting I knew very little about Che Guevara prior to reading this. There's the famous photo, which is plastered across anything merchandisable usually completely out of context, and his association with Fidel Castro. I was ignorant of the who, what, where, when etc. Thankfully this biography answers every question I was ever likely to have about the great man.

Split into three parts, each section focuses on a different stage of Che's life. Part 1 gives a brief glimpse into his childhood and goes up to the beginning of his "working relationship" with Fidel Castro. Part 2 covers the battle for Cuba and the Cuban Revolution and Part 3 focuses on life after the Cuban victory up to his death in Bolivia.

There is a huge amount of detail and ground covered in this book, so much so that 'huge' isn't an apt enough word to use. There were times when I was completely enthralled by the story the author was presenting me with, his research phenomenal and attention to detail obviously passionate; I had to keep reminding myself this was true. Despite how Che is depicted in pop culture he wasn't some kind of machine gun wielding Bruce Willis type One Man Army. The battles he fought were under cover, in the dark and in the dirt, fought in close quarters, nasty, brutal and ugly. The author is superb at putting you in the midst of a battle; you can quite easily go from philosophy and politics to blood soaked ambushes.

Sometimes, though, the detail is overwhelming. On a few occasions the author tries to fit too much into too few sentences; minor events, dates, places, names are reeled off in quick succession, becoming too much to process and easy to forget. I understand the author wanted to give a comprehensive account of the story behind the legend but at least a hundred pages could have been cut. This was the only issue I had.

"For Ernesto, the iconography of modern Argentine nationhood was merely a superficial veneer, "a luxurious facade" under which the country's true "soul" lay; and that soul was rotten and diseased"

If you're after a dense and complete history of Che Guevara then I cannot recommend this book enough. Yes, it's 800 long pages and at times hard going but it's still an important book packed with intriguing history.

Marc says

I rarely give those 5 stars, but after some hard thoughts, I decided that this one deserves it. The author tries to give an account as balanced as you possibly could about a man as complex as Che. The research effort put into this is immense and it shows in the details.

The important thing for me was that Anderson showed us both sides of the man. His other-worldly drive for justice and solidarity, but also his cold-blooded ruthlessness and obsession for discipline. I firmly think he is

one of the most intelligent men of his era, but he is also a showcase for what can happen when a great mind is letting his emotions take over at virtually all time. After reading this book, it is clear that Che was and is misunderstood by a whole lot of people. In the end he was a flawed man, who believed that what he was doing was for the good of the poor and the oppressed. He believed that was worth to sacrifice his own comfort and ultimately own life. I can only respect him for that. I admit that I try to overlook his dark side a little bit in order to let him shine just enough.

And may I say it...this book changes the way I view things...

A.J. Howard says

The great historical tragedy surrounding the legacy of Che Guevara is that man who was nothing but completely and utterly sincere has become a symbol of insincerity. I'm not sure if this was always the case, but at least when I see people of my generation wearing a Che shirt or displaying a Che poster, I no longer see the famous Korda photograph of Guevara, I see the words "I am a giant poser" tattooed in bold relief on that persons face. There may be people who are sincere in their admiration, but usually a Che shirt symbolizes that the wearer listens to Rage Against the Machine in their car stereos on the way to the mall to spend their parents money at the most convenient Hot Topic. As others have noted, the person who would be most revolted by this misappropriation of identity would be Che himself.

The cult of Che continues to make some sense, even after the end of the Cold War. Guevara was brilliant, curious, compassionate, and utterly committed to his principal beliefs. Among the communist leaders of the 20th century, Guevara emerges as the one most faithfully committed to his principles. It's hard to imagine Che compromising Marxist principles for the sake of economic expediency, like Lenin, or for the accumulation of personal power, like Stalin. Che was willing to die for his beliefs, indeed he arguably actively sought his own eventual martyrdom.

Additionally, Che's legacy, like Kurt Cobain's or Jim Morrison's, greatly benefited from the relative brevity of his life. Che died soon enough that his entire life in still basked in the warm glow of revolution. Perhaps one of the reasons he appears so steadfast is that he didn't live long enough to compromise his legacy. There's the added benefit that Che was a pretty handsome guy, so we remember him as a dashing guerilla type. There is no footage of Che as a doddering 80 year old man still wearing army fatigues, rambling incoherencies.

In many ways, Che was an archetype for the baby boomer generation. Born into a middle class Argentinian family, Che spent his early years searching for a sense of meaning. He eventually found it in a sympathy with the poor and exploited peasants of Latin America. This further exacerbated an already present sense of anti-Americanism, that lasted throughout his lifetime. Contrary to U.S. Cold Warrior theory, it was antipathy to Americans that eventually led him to Marxism. To be fair, such feelings weren't exactly unjustified. Wherever there was a South or Central American corrupt dictator exploiting his people there was usually the government of the United States standing behind them. Communism was initially just the bugaboo used to justify intervention. The real reason the United States intervened in South America during the Eisenhower

years was to protect the interests of United Fruit, Coca-Cola and other American companies. Guevara's sympathies for the downtrodden of Latin America eventually drove him to armed resistance. In Guatemala, he fought against the U.S. backed coup against a democratically elected president. The failure of this struggle taught Guevara many lessons, and was probably the last push that led to him becoming a full-fledged Communist.

After the coup in Guatemala, Che continued to Mexico City, which was at the time the exile capital of Americas. Here he connected with a group of Cuban exiles through whom he eventually met a young lawyer who had recently been let out of prison for a failed attack on a barracks, Fidel Castro. Here Guevara finally found the purpose that would consume the rest of his life. The rest, as they say, is history.

Che's life is a story of a young man's search for fulfillment, eventual satisfaction, and an attempt to, for lack of better words, "chase that feeling." The success of Castro's revolution is truly a remarkable story. A group of several dozen rebels led by Castro landed in Cuba in December, 1956. Within weeks their numbers had been reduced to less than twenty. Yet just a little two years after their disastrous landing, Batista's dictatorship had collapsed and the rebels were marching into Havana. I'm not sure what sure of this ultimate success can be apportioned to the leadership of Castro, Guevara, and others, but obviously a tremendous deal of luck was involved.

Che spent the remainder of his life with the ambition to duplicate the Cuban revolution in his birthplace. Here's where Che's many faults came into play. Guevara had all of the arrogance and hardheadedness that came with being a steadfast ideologue. Just because something had been done once, Che believed that it could be duplicated in different situations by following a set of principles. This belief led to nothing but disasters of an increasingly hubristic nature. Che failed that his earlier success in Cuba made a repeat of that success near impossible. Now, Latin American governments and their U.S. supporters would not tolerate small bands of guerillas operating in the mountains, allowing them to build up their resources. Instead, they would be smashed quickly and brutally.

After seeing several of his sponsored guerilla groups destroyed, as a result of what he perceived as a failure to follow his instructions, Che decided to reenter the field himself. Ironically, these expeditions on a smaller scale resembled the situation the United States was concurrently experiencing in Vietnam. Che went into the Congo convinced that his leadership and Cuban support could inspire the disparate rebel groups there. Instead, the rebellion had been smashed within months and the path was set the stage for the 30 year Mobutu dictatorship.

Che's final venture in Bolivia was a complete and utter fiasco. The farce didn't even deserve the term revolution, it was more of a Cuban intervention in a sovereign country. Castro and Guevara decided that Bolivia was the appropriate launching spot for what they hoped would be a continent-wide uprising and they strong armed elements in Bolivia to provide the reluctant and feeble native backing. The struggle was essentially Cuban led, and mostly Cuban fought with an element of Bolivian support. Not surprisingly, it was a disaster from the start, and Che didn't follow his own rule book. Events culminated in Guevara's eventual surrender and execution.

Like I mentioned, Che had all of the strengths and weaknesses of an intellectual who lives in sole service of an idea. He was a moral man without hypocrisy, who could be charismatic, funny, and brilliant. But he served his idea to a fault. As much as he railed against the untoward influence of the U.S. over Latin America, his beliefs put Cuba into a much more subservient position toward the U.S.S.R. Even before his death, he left his children fatherless to serve the revolution. He was also uncompromising to a fault. He was willing to look favorably upon nuclear armageddon as long as it served his cause. In the romantic accounts of Guevara's life and death, it is not mentioned that he died in an attempt to spark World War III. His aspirations were that his uprising in Bolivia would lead to a continent wide uprising that would create a second Vietnam in the Americas. He hoped this would inspire China and the Soviet Union to set aside their sectarian differences to unite in a general struggle against the United States. He foresaw a more socialistic humanity emerging from the ashes of a nuclear conflict. He was willing to see the death of millions as long as it served his ideological beliefs. No matter his good qualities, this lessens the sense of tragedy surrounding his execution, for me at least.

Whatever the case may be, the life and death of Ernesto 'Che' Guevara is an epic tale, and Jon Lee Anderson does an admirable job in relating it. The investigative journalistic work that Anderson did oozes out of the work. Anderson spent years on this project, and lived for years in Cuba. In addition to reading almost everything written about or by Che, Anderson has interviewed scores of Guevara's contemporaries, in Cuba and Argentina, including childhood friends, Cuban officials, and fellow guerillas. What emerges is a balanced biography that is rare for such a polarizing subject. My review perhaps does not exhibit this quality, but this is more of a result of the conclusions I drew from the book and not a reflection on any inherent biases Anderson might have. Anderson does not seek to beatify or demonize, he seeks to report. Doing so, he actually was able to break news. It was his research in the course of writing this book that led to the discovery of Guevara's long lost remains near a airstrip in Bolivia in 1997. Anderson chips off the tarnish of mythology to prevent an evenhanded and reliable account of life of one of the most iconic figures of the 20th century.

Hadrian says

Extremely interesting biography of a very controversial man. I'm still not quite sure what to think of him, but I know considerably more about him.

A side note: my used copy had annotations throughout the first 200 pages - entirely critical comments: 'bum', 'dumbass', etc. That is not the point of a biography, to confirm your own prejudices. It is to form a portrait of a man's life to analyze and learn from.

Kris says

Jon Lee Anderson's biography of Che Guevara is exhaustively researched, which was a benefit to me, since I had never before studied Che's life in detail, nor had I read about the Bay of Pigs or the Cuban Missile Crisis from anything but an American perspective. I found it to be an illuminating, albeit sometimes exhausting, read.

This biography combines several approaches to history in one. In the first section, Anderson provides vivid details of Che's early life, his love of literature and learning, his studies to be a medical doctor, and his travels through Latin America, which eventually helped to lead him to his political awakening as a Marxist. This first section works particularly well as a work of intellectual history, especially with the addition of many quotations from Che's journals, correspondence, and other writings. I felt that I gained a good perspective on Che as an individual here, including his personal battles with very serious asthma, which continued to plague him throughout his life.

The second section of the biography focuses on the Cuban Revolution, with copious details of the Che's leadership in the guerrilla warfare that eventually led to the fall of the Batista regime and the rise of Castro's Cuban republic. This section focuses especially on military history, and on the political tactics that Castro and Che utilized to gain strength in the Cuban countryside as well as internationally. (Anderson's discussion of Castro's tactics to make the world press believe he had a much larger force at his command than he actually did was especially fascinating.) In this section, Anderson shows Che's growth as a leader, as well as his close relationship with Castro. Anderson doesn't flinch from sharing details of Che's responsibility for executions of comrades and of enemies in the field, the darker side of the Cuban Revolution.

The third section, which is the longest in the biography, focuses on several areas: Che's work for the Cuban government to develop Cuba's industrial infrastructure and move its economy from capitalism to socialism; Che's role in the complex international intrigue and negotiations of the time, maneuvering against the US while also playing the USSR and China off each other; and Che's final role as column leader and field commander of two failed insurrections, one in the Congo and one in Bolivia, which eventually cost him his life. There's a wealth of detail to assimilate in this section - names of foreign agents and Cubans fighting by Che's side, complex sequences of diplomatic maneuvers and moves by espionage agents, and lengthy documentation of every military decision taken in the field in the Congo and Bolivia, as well as analysis of all the reasons why those missions failed.

In spite of this flood of names, facts, dates, and places, Anderson doesn't lose sight of his main themes in the biography. I emerged with an understanding of Che's unwavering and strict commitment to Marxism. He gave his life for his belief in the necessity of an international uprising against imperial and capitalist powers. In spite of some differences in opinion between Che and Castro on the best model for the Communist Revolution to follow in Cuba (Che preferred the Maoist model - he was concerned about how close Soviet Communism was to capitalism, and he believed there were many more parallels between the peasants of Cuba and those of China), Anderson presents Che as a dedicated, selfless, and loyal comrade and friend for Castro. He also lived an ascetic life, constantly on guard against receiving any benefits that the average Cuban citizen did not receive. In addition to providing these laudatory aspects of Che's personality, Anderson makes very clear Che's imperfections - his zealous commitment to his political cause meant that his family, including his children, had very little contact with him. When he left Cuba for the Congo, he did not expect to return. He could be overly strict and distanced at home, in the office, or in the field. Taken as a whole, Anderson's portrait of Che provides the reader with an understanding of the importance of his role in Latin American and world politics, both before and after his death, as well as with a richer understanding of this complex man.
