

Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family

A Book Review

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This brilliantly written book reads like a murder mystery; it's been called gutsy, soulful, pyrotechnic, significant and transformative. I couldn't agree more.

Bowden was a journalist with the Tucson Citizen who became fascinated by events around the U.S. - Mexico border in the early 1980s, a world where smuggling people and drugs was the norm. One of his articles in 1996 was for Harper's Magazine about the devastating poverty, violence and gang life in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the town across the river from El Paso Texas. He realized that Juárez's troubles were the result of policies "...of the fabled New World Order in which capital moves easily and labor is trapped by borders."

After hearing of the 1995 senseless killing of a 27 year old man in El Paso, he looked into it, and then in 2002 he published *Down by the River*. The river is the Rio Grande, which in this area is the border with Mexico, a sluggish river and less than grand. **Bruno Jordan** was the man murdered, the brother of a Drug Enforcement Officer (DEA) who was up for promotion to head the local drug control office. The gangs wanted less enforcement and the murder appeared to be a message for him to take his job lightly. No one is sure; we can only guess.

While researching Jordan's death, Bowden learned of one U.S. Customs officer who made \$1,000,000 one night for simply not 'seeing' a single truck cross the border.

The export of drugs from Mexico to the U.S. had started to boom decades earlier, after alcohol prohibition was repealed and a new trade - drugs, emerged to take its place and it's estimated at over \$300 billion a year. Tragically, about 20,000 Mexicans are killed every year because of it.

Bowden wrote that "Mexico and the United States are partners in an unofficial economy called the drug business" and the war on drugs was a scam to increase profit from drug sales, not to reduce use. To understand the murder he had to look 'at the dirty laundry of two nations.'

In the late 1960's I had done research on marijuana in Canada because I was setting up the Legalize Marijuana committee and needed to know what I was talking about. Then forty year later, in 2002 the year Bowden's book was published, I did renewed research to relearn the issues and update myself to attend a conference where I was a delegate for decriminalizing marijuana. I was stunned, as *Down by River* revealed, about how much larger and more dangerous the market had become.

Bowden showed the relationship between drugs and money, so let us follow the money.

Grand Cayman Island is the largest of three tiny Cayman Islands, about two hundred miles south of Cuba in the Gulf of Mexico. It's a tropical paradise, where you can swim with stingrays in North Sound or take a submarine ride along the coral reef on the south.

It's about an hour or so by plane south of Miami, about two hours north of Columbia and two hours east of Mexico - therefore, central to two drug producing nations and the huge drug consuming American market. Politically the islands are British Overseas Territories. They are not independent, not a country, and not truly British. They occupy a small area, one-quarter the size of New York City (102 vs. 468 sq. miles) with a small population of 57,000 who have the 12Th highest standard of living in the world.

About half of those people live in George Town on Grand Cayman and this tiny town is the fifth-largest banking center in the world! There are 279 banks and 260 of them do no banking in the Caymans. With the Caymans' unusual political structure, laws get strange and enforcement stranger. Drug lords can take a day trip to the Caymans, do some banking, avoid all taxes and be home for dinner. Money laundering and tax avoidance are the Caymans banking business.

Some people say that the war on drugs has been a failure, but they misunderstand its purpose. It has made billions of dollars for those in the market; it has fueled a private prison industry in the U.S., made money for the banks and has been used to politically control nations. Was it intended to control drugs, or to make them more profitable? The facts provide the answer; it has been enormously successful at making drugs more profitable, and a dismal failure at control.

Down by the River passionately brings the facts together.

Some of the material in this review is covered in my book *An Insiders Memoir; How Economics Changed to Work Against Us*, Chapter 3: Economic Lessons; marijuana, money, Kenya and aid.

Down by the River: Drugs, Money, Murder, and Family

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