

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS for *LIFE AND DEATH IN THE ANDES: ON THE TRAIL OF BANDITS, HEROES, AND REVOLUTIONARIES*

1. What inspired you to write a book on traveling the length of South America?

I lived in Peru for about four years in the 1980s and 1990s and also spent time traveling around South America to work on various documentary film projects, particularly in Peru, Brazil, Bolivia, and Chile, among other countries. During that time, I stumbled across a number of what I considered pretty amazing stories: the policeman who turned down a six million dollar bribe and brought down Pablo Escobar in Colombia; an Incan girl sacrificed on top of a 20,000 foot Peruvian volcano; an upper-class ballerina who hid the guerrilla leader of the Shining Path above her dance studio; and the last Yámana speaker in Tierra del Fuego. I was interested in figuring out a way to tell these stories and interconnect them. I finally decided that traveling the length of the Andes was the best way to do so. It allowed me to visit the locations and interview people where these stories had occurred. It also helped me set the stories in the “here and now” and see what effect they had had on those still living. And, of course, it also allowed me to set those stories against the epic background of the Andes Mountains.

2. This is your fourth book on South America, where you worked as an anthropologist, journalist, and as a documentary filmmaker. What drew you to studying South America’s history and culture?

When I was a boy, I read a lot of adventure books —especially Edgar Rice Burrough’s *The Hollow Earth* series and William Willis’s trilogy of sailing rafts across the Pacific from Peru and Ecuador. I suspect that, deep down, those stories made me want to visit distant and exotic worlds. Later, in college, I was torn between studying abroad in Europe or South America. I ultimately decided to study in France for a year, but I knew I would figure out a way to get to South America afterwards. As a graduate student in anthropology, I entered a program where I could do half of my studies at the *Universidad Católica* in Lima, Peru, and also do field work. I ended up living with a recently-contacted tribe in the Peruvian Amazon and remained in Peru for four years. Peru is a country with a multitude of worlds within it, what Peruvians call *Peru profundo*. I was extremely interested in both the Amazon

and in the Andes and ancient cultures, so Peru and South America turned out to be the perfect place to explore those.

3. What was your biggest challenge in writing this book?

The colossal logistics and scope of it. The Andes stretch for 4,500 miles and the mountains and terrain are stupendous in size, with tiny ribbons of roads clinging sometimes to the edges of sheer cliffs. In Peru alone there are 70 summits over 18,000 feet and 11 of those are over 20,000 feet. It's a scale that's difficult to imagine unless you've been there and have seen it yourself. Trying to gather stories from such a far-flung landscape was definitely a challenge, not to mention the necessity of traveling by nearly every means of transportation possible, from boats, hiking, and climbing to buses, trains, jeeps, Zodiacs, and even reed rafts!

The immensity of the research was also a challenge. Each story I set out to explore had a totally unique history unrelated to the others; the project was thus different than researching a book where a single story unfolds, chapter after chapter, but with the same background. In *Life and Death in the Andes*, each chapter has a completely different backstory and characters. For one story I was researching Charles Darwin and for another Pablo Escobar, or Che Guevara, or Butch Cassidy, or some other character. Each chapter was linked by the presence of the Andes and by my voyage, but each really existed in time and space in its own particular world. The research phase was both fun and very intense.

4. Why do you think today's audiences are still attracted to Pablo Escobar's story? In the book, you mention a Colombian soap opera about Escobar that was a national hit and Netflix's new series *Narcos* has been gaining a cult following in the U.S.

Escobar's story still resonates with audiences in the U.S. and in Colombia for a number of reasons. For one thing, Escobar's story is the classic "rags to riches" story—a penniless man who bootstrapped his career and in a very short period of time became one of the richest men in the world. Colombia is rife with these kinds of stories about bandits in their past who took on a folkloric stature, similar to the story of "Robin Hood." Second, people seem

to love gangster stories in general, especially *notorious* gangster stories. Escobar himself admired Al Capone and was similarly, for a while, just as ruthless and notorious. Third, Escobar had a tremendous impact on both Colombian and U.S. societies because in Colombia he shook the foundation of the Colombian state to its very core and in the U.S. he imported such gigantic quantities of cocaine that it heavily impacted our society. Since then, the demand for cocaine in our country has never stopped. Both the Colombian television series, *El Patron de Mal*, and the U.S. series, *Narcos*, tap into parts of that mythology. The real story about Escobar, however, is even more interesting than the fictionalized one.

5. **It may surprise readers that the father of evolution Charles Darwin was originally planning to enter the Anglican clergy after studying at Cambridge. How do you think his religious background and goals affected his research in the Galapagos?**

Darwin's religious background prevented him, at least in the beginning, from understanding the data he began collecting in South America as he circumnavigated the globe. Since Darwin initially believed that God had created every plant and animal on Earth and had placed each in its current locations, it was almost impossible for him to grasp the idea that mindless forces of nature were actually capable of creating entirely new species. Darwin's religious views, however, gradually began to change as his voyage progressed and as biological and geological evidence that contradicted the bible continued to pour in.

Even when he landed in the Galapagos Islands, however, Darwin still very much believed in divine creation and in the immutability of species. That was the primary reason that he completely bungled the collection of birds on the Galapagos Islands, a story that most people are unaware of. It wasn't because Darwin not a careful naturalist. Rather, it was because of his religious beliefs that he saw no reason to collect certain kinds of evidence. In fact, Darwin so bungled the collection process of his famous "Galapagos Finches"—now symbols of classic Darwinian evolution—that he was never able to use these same finches to support his later theory of evolution. A quote at the beginning of this chapter is especially appropriate: "What you see is what you believed before you looked." That phenomenon, in fact, is a good example of how culture works in general: none of us really perceive "reality." Instead, we perceive what we *think* is reality through a thick veil of our particular culture's

beliefs and assumptions. It was a testament to Darwin that his mind was sharp and open enough to penetrate this veil. In the end, that's how he came up with the theory of evolution.

6. What was your most memorable recollection during your travels for this book?

I would say meeting the last Yámana speaker, an 84-year-old woman living in the southernmost city in the world, in Tierra del Fuego, on Navarino Island in Chile. She was and still is the last speaker of a language that is no doubt thousands of years old. Three of her ancestors had met Charles Darwin, visited London and met the king and queen of England. Now, an entire culture, language, and history had been reduced to this one woman's memory. I also visited nearby Wulaia Bay, where her ancestors hailed from—a wild, windswept, and beautiful place in Patagonia, a bay once full of Yámana natives in canoes with small fire hearths in their boats and smoke curling up, and where Darwin's *H.M.S. Beagle* was once anchored. Now the whole area is completely silent except for the sound of the water and the wind in the trees. The location of a vanished culture, Wulaia Bay is both a beautiful and eerie place. I arrived there at the end of my journey. It's a story that took place at the tip of the South American continent, an area one 19th-century missionary once referred to as "the uttermost part of the Earth."

7. How would you describe your day-to-day experience in Peru at the height of its conflict with the Shining Path? Did you find yourself in particularly risky situations?

The Shining Path is a guerrilla organization that is illegal in Peru, but I was never really in any risky situations with the group, even though I traveled in some of their "liberated zones" at the height of their guerrilla war—places where the roads had hammer and sickle flags and the government officials had abandoned their offices and fled. I never even felt unsafe while living in Lima when the government had a "shoot-on-sight" curfew in effect at night. As long as you didn't go out at night, you didn't get shot! The reason I felt that way was because the Shining Path's war was with the Peruvian state, not with foreign powers or with foreign tourists. Had I been a member of the government traveling in some of the areas I visited, I definitely would have been risking my life. But since I was a foreigner, I felt fairly certain that even

if they had stopped me at some remote road block in the Andes, they would have let me go. When I interviewed Shining Path guerrillas in prison, I actually felt safer in their cell blocks than in the rest of the prison that housed common criminals, because the guerrillas behaved pretty much as political prisoners, which is actually what they were.

8. What was an unexpected finding that has stayed with you since completing this book?

While I was in Peru investigating the story of the capture of the Shining Path leader, Abimael Guzmán, I received an e-mail from a woman who said she had read about me in the local paper and was part of a woman's group in Lima. She said she wanted to meet me. I thought, "Great, a Peruvian book group!," and assumed it was because some of my previous books had been translated into Spanish and are available in Peru. After exchanging a few e-mails, she then told me that she was actually a representative of a group of female prisoners. So this of course intrigued me. Then, a bit later, she informed me that she actually represented Shining Path prisoners at a woman's prison in Lima. The woman said she wanted to meet because she had some gifts and a message for me from the prisoners. Eventually, curiosity got the better of me and, although nervous, I finally met her at a public park in downtown Lima.

She turned out to be a middle-aged woman with black hair and brown skin, and she had a large shopping bag with her. We sat on a park bench and she proceeded to tell me her story. It turned out that a number of Shining Path female prisoners were actually fans of my previous book, *The Last Days of the Incas*, which describes the conquest of the Inca Empire and also how the Incas formed a guerrilla army and fought back against the Spaniards for decades after the conquest. She then withdrew a Xeroxed copy of my book from her bag, sheets of paper bound with plastic rings, and handed it to me. The pages were covered in tiny notes written in the margins by the hands of a multitude of prisoners. Notes were scrawled in the margins, like, "Look at this!" or "Hasn't changed!" etc. Much of the text had been underlined. She then gave me a card, signed by the prisoners. One of the signatures was that of Elena Iparraguirre, Abimael Guzmán's wife. The note said that my book was the first book about the conquest to have been translated into Spanish in Peru and that the prisoners had learned much from it. Learning the details of

their own history, which had so impacted their culture, had deeply affected them. They had identified with the Inca guerrillas, they said, who had fought against the Spaniards and thanked me for the trouble I had taken to write the book. It was one of the strangest and most unexpected meetings with readers I've ever experienced.

9. Why do you think South America has a unique relationship between its past and present?

The conquest of the South American continent and its cultures by various European powers has clearly shaped the last 500 years of South America's history. This official language of Brazil is Portuguese, but the country has more than 135 indigenous languages. Colombia's official language is Spanish, but there are more than 60 indigenous tongues spoken. 20% of Peruvians are Quechua speakers, the language spoken by the ancient Incas, while another 40 different indigenous languages are spoken in the Peruvian Amazon. In addition, some 50 uncontacted tribes still roam the Upper Amazon—tribes that have yet to be “contacted” via the same process initiated by Columbus some 500 years ago. Thus, in many ways and on many levels, South America is very much a continent still dealing with the after-effects of the European conquest and the conquest's effect on the immense variety of indigenous cultures, as well as all of the problems of assimilation that derive from those conflicts.

10. What's one aspect of South America for which you wish the general public had a better appreciation?

That it's an immense territory. Brazil is the same size as the entire continental United States. The Andes Mountains, the longest mountain chain in the world, stretch a distance equal to San Francisco across the United States and half way out into the Atlantic Ocean. And that this immense territory has an equally immense biological and cultural diversity: 448 indigenous languages are spoken in South America in twelve very distinct countries; the continent also contains 40% of all the world's plant and animal species. Add to this mix thousands and thousands of years of indigenous civilizations plus everything from urban cities of nearly 20 million (such as Sao Paulo, Brazil) to isolated villages of uncontacted natives in the Amazon then the result is a continent that is literally impossible to generalize about. It has tremendous diversity.

11. What's an underrated travel destination or experience that you'd recommend to travelers looking to discover places away from typical tourist destinations such as Machu Picchu?

Lake Guatavita Reserve in Colombia, where the legend of El Dorado arose; Lambayeque, Peru, with its nearby Moche pyramids; Ollantaytambo, Peru, the only Inca town that is still inhabited today; the floating Uros Islands on Lake Titicaca (if you spend a night in a totora reed “hotel”!); Manu National Park in southeastern Peru, about as wild a tropical rainforest area as you will find on this planet; Copacabana, Bolivia, for its location and unique festivals; almost any of the islands on Lake Titicaca; La Paz, Bolivia, because it is such an ethnically interesting city and the highest capital in the world; Potosi, Bolivia, for the mind-boggling underground labyrinth of its ancient silver mines; the Salar de Uyuni and its incredible hotel made of salt, in Bolivia; Ushuaia, the Beagle Channel and Navarino Island in Tierra del Fuego, straddling the border between Argentina and Chile, because of the sheer beauty of this entire area. Also, any ship voyage leaving Punta Arenas and headed south to Cape Horn.

12. How does your filmmaking and biology/anthropology background inform your writing style?

I think both biology and anthropology afford a writer a unique perspective on the world. When I wrote *The Last Days of the Incas*, it was impossible for me not to perceive the conquest of the Incas by another empire through any other prism than those of anthropology and biology. The conquest was a struggle over *resources*, after all, and hence was a story as old as humanity. Similarly, in *Life and Death in the Andes*, it was impossible for me to view the stories of Pablo Escobar, Che Guevara, the Shining Path, or the sacrifice of Inca children on mountaintops without taking this larger anthropological/biological view. These were individuals, after all, who were struggling for similar things—to extract resources and control their environment, which often included trying to control other human beings.

A filmmaking background perhaps makes my writing style more visual than it might otherwise have been. Or more cinematic. I have a very visual brain, so I often write about scenes, places, or characters that I can already clearly picture in my mind as I write, so the writing part becomes more a means of

conveying those pictures into words, rather than creating the pictures *from* words.

13. Are there any particular writers you've looked up to when writing this book?

Yes, and it's a rather long list: Edgar Rice Burroughs, William Willis, Thor Heyerdahl, Bruce Chatwin, Hiram Bingham, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Pablo Neruda, José Maria Arguedas, Chaucer, Thomas Moore, Joseph Campbell, Isabel Allende, Eric Hoffer, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, Pedro Cieza de León, Lucas Bridges, etc.

14. What is your advice for aspiring travel and history writers?

Be passionate, read as much as you can, learn as much as you can, and learn the craft of writing. Then immerse yourself in a part of the world's history or culture and apply everything you have learned so that you can try and explain what you have learned, putting your own unique perspective on it. Time, not just landscapes, is epic, immense, and fleeting. Writing helps you pin down those evanescent moments, scenes, and thoughts, making them permanent. It's an enormous challenge but also a very gratifying one.

15. A television series based on your last book *The Last Days of the Incas*, is currently in development at FX, is that correct?

That's right—FX wants to make a 13-part dramatic series based on the book, which is about how 168 Spanish conquistadors conquered the ten million-strong Inca Empire. Right now, they are developing the script. Andrew MacDonald, who has produced a number of Danny Boyle's films, is the executive producer. Gina Balian is the executive producer in charge of the series at FX. It's a co-production between FX Channel in the U.S. and DNA Films in the U.K. It will be the first time the conquest of Peru has been portrayed in a dramatic series.