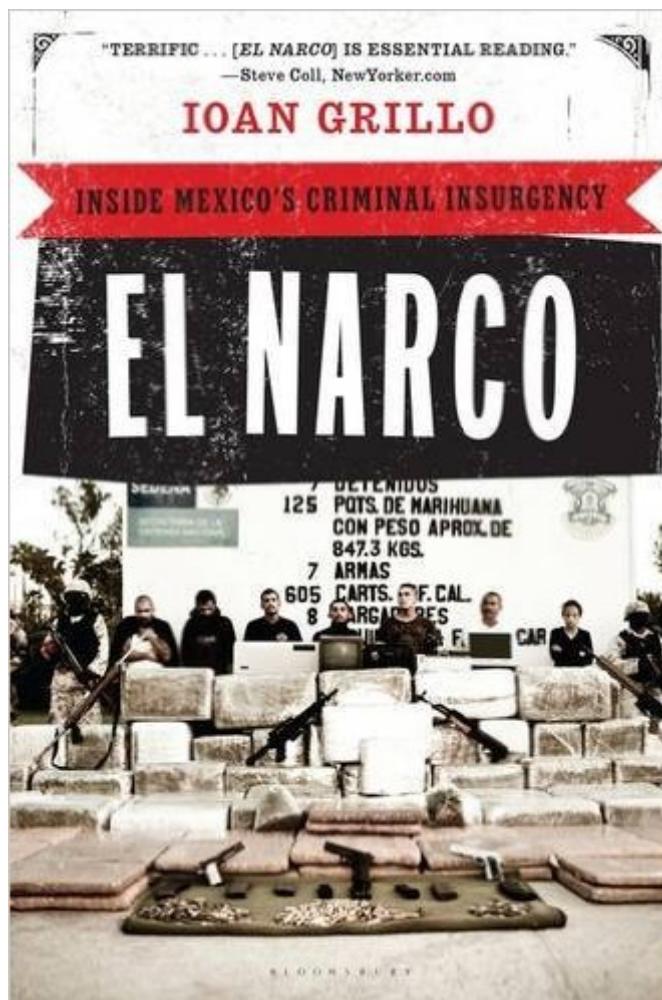


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# El Narco: Inside Mexico's Criminal Insurgency



## Synopsis

The world has watched, stunned, the bloodshed in Mexico. Forty thousand murdered since 2006; police chiefs shot within hours of taking office; mass graves comparable to those of civil wars; car bombs shattering storefronts; headless corpses heaped in town squares. And it is all because a few Americans are getting high. Or is it part of a worldwide shadow economy that threatens Mexico's democracy? The United States throws Black Hawk helicopters, DEA assistance, and lots of money at the problem. But in secret, Washington is at a loss. Who are these mysterious figures who threaten Mexico's democracy? What is El Narco? El Narco is not a gang; it is a movement and an industry drawing in hundreds of thousands, from bullet-riddled barrios to marijuana-covered mountains. The conflict spawned by El Narco has given rise to paramilitary death squads battling from Guatemala to the Texas border (and sometimes beyond). In this "propulsive ... high-octane" book (Publishers Weekly), Ioan Grillo draws the first definitive portrait of Mexico's cartels and how they have radically transformed in the past decade.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the last five years or so, the horrific violence across the Rio Grande has made headlines in the USA. There are articles about seemingly random gun battles in major cities, executions of drug "players," police, and even journalists covering the story. The book "El Narco" provides historical context and gripping reporting about this terrible situation. The reader learns that the "Mexican drug trade" for the US started with the smuggling of opium across the border to fuel the needs of Chinese workers in the 19th century. In the 1960s, the rise in marijuana consumption led to importation of

this drug. The sucessful Federal (US) efforts to shut down Florida as a route for Cocaine smuggling in the 1980s led to use of Mexico, with its large border, as the alternative pathway. The book also explains how and why the violence has escalated so dramatically in the last few years, stemming in part from the end of one party political rule, and perhaps more importantly, the morphing of police/soldiers in Mexico from passive players (taking bribes) to active players, culminating in the rise of the Zetas, an almost unbelievably brutal drug organization. Like any good reporter, the author provides telling details. A graphic example involves the take down of a major drug kingpin in an operation which resulted in fatalities amongst the soldiers/police who did the job. Gunmen from the kingpin's organization infiltrated the funeral of one of the soldiers, and murdered several family members. That is the way the game is played South of the Border. My one (minor) criticism concerns the final chapter, in which the author provides suggested approaches which might help stem the violent tide. These ideas ( e.g.

There is no doubt that Grillo has done his homework and knows a fair amount about the Mexican drug trade. His writing seems supported by an expertise and detailed research. Unfortunately, the book came up a little short of my expectations. The Good Points: \* A very detailed look at the Mexican drug cartels, with sufficient detail to make it seem believable and well researched.\* Unusual for the "true crime" genre, Grillo looks at Mexican society and how it has both affected and been affected by the drug trade. Close-knit families, geography, and even religion all have had an affect on how the cartels grow and prosper. Very nice to see these topics included.\* With its discounted price, the book is a great deal. I am a big fan of discounted titles as a way to read books on topics that normally wouldn't catch my interest. For the price, an excellent value. The Not-So-Good Points\* The book is more like a collection of essays than a history book. I didn't find any underlying thesis to the work, just a series of chapters on different topics. Given Grillo's background, the comparison to a series of (detailed) magazine articles seems obvious. (Think Atlantic Monthly).\* Grill can't seem to decide if he is writing a history text or a series of editorials. His opinions come through very strongly, and he is prone to inserting snarky and rather informal personal commentary in the work. It takes away from the quality of the book, and quite honestly breaks my concentration.\* I found his writing style to be somewhat stiff and unyielding. Not the long, complicated prose of a scholarly history text, but not the easy-read language of a mass-market volume.

This is an informative book, that takes a broad look at an extremely complicated issue. I think it

leaves the reader with a general understanding of what is involved in the evolving narco war in Mexico. The author also provides a good list for further reading at the end of the book. I'm glad I read this book, which was certainly worth the \$3 asking price. This being said, better editing could have made this a great book. I skimmed a few other reviews and see that others feel the same way -- and for good reason! Some passages are beautifully executed, and read like they were pulled from the pages of Rolling Stone; this is the book at its best, combining the fruits of an obviously extensive journalistic career covering Mexico with solid supplemental factual research that feels simultaneously informative and exciting. But much of the time, I found myself rolling my eyes at phrasing that tries to hard to sound clever. A good example is this rather forced alliteration: "weapons are built in Beijing, sold in San Antonio, and used to murder in Matamoros." 'Oh,' you say, 'that's not so bad.' Well, you might reconsider after 300 pages. The different sections were of variable quality, almost as if the author had reproduced a series of previously published articles in bound form. Almost every section was constructed differently, so that some passages read like quality undercover pop journalism, while others sounded more academic -- if nevertheless rather opinionated. It must be said though, that the author's insistence on using slang names for the drugs in question detracted from whatever academic flair he might otherwise have cultivated.

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