

BOOK REVIEW

# ‘This Love Is Not For Cowards’ by Robert Andrew Powell

By Bill Littlefield | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 13, 2012



BRUCE BERMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

**Tomas Campos, of Los Indios.**

It's a challenge to build and maintain a competitive professional soccer team under any circumstances, but the odds grow longer when one of your goal keepers flees the city after thugs put a shotgun to his head and one of your coaches is murdered.

These are the circumstances under which Robert Andrew Powell found Los Indios of Juarez, Mexico, trying to survive in 2008. Against expectations, this family-run, minor-league concern had managed to climb out of the second division to join Mexico's top flight of teams. Pride among the team's fans, the loudest of whom perversely referred to themselves as "El Kartel," was palpable.

"This Love Is Not for Cowards," which chronicles the season Powell spent with the team, is something of an accidental book. Powell initially had gone to Juarez not for soccer but because he was curious about this city known mostly for daily murders and mutilations, most of them the result of constant combat between two drug-running organizations. He wanted to know who would remain in such a place and what keeps them there.

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Once there he discovered that the team represented much more than a leisure-time diversion for residents; Los Indios provided a source of joy. Thugs and drunks attended their games, but so did cheering families. Convincing top players to relocate to Juarez was out of the question. The soccer fans of Los Indios were savvy enough to understand that their team was a mutt, but it was *their* mutt. In their small stadium "so close to Texas that an errant corner kick might land in an El Paso railyard," that was enough.

Powell could have written about Los Indios from the relative safety of El Paso. Some of the people connected to the team crossed the bridge to the United States when they returned home after practice. But Powell chose to live in a city that was, as he writes, "home to hundreds of thousands of people who strive only to dance and watch soccer."

Who can blame the people of Juarez for trying to avoid dwelling on the negatives. It doesn't take Powell long to figure out that, besides the warring cartels, Juarez is also a police state featuring two armies of uniformed thugs. One is local, the other

## THIS LOVE IS NOT FOR COWARDS: Salvation and Soccer in Ciudad Juarez

**Author:** Robert Andrew Powell

**Publisher:** Bloomsbury

**Number of pages:** 261

**Book price:** \$25



federal, and each labors on behalf of opposing drug organizations fighting for control of this infamous highway into the lucrative US market.



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**Los Indios — playing in Juarez, Mexico, under police protection — has rallied fans in a city under siege by warring drug cartels.**

Part of the strength of his book comes from Powell’s invitation to witness the process of his own terrible learning. In Juarez, he meets Francisco Ibarra, the apparently optimistic team owner, who runs Los Indios as “a vital social program, the one bright spot in a city growing impossibly dangerous.” Later it turns out Ibarra may be laundering money for one of the cartels. As Powell settles into life in Juarez signs of violence and death become commonplace. When “the first cartel car bomb” kills a doctor, a paramedic, and several others just blocks from a bar where Powell is watching an Indios game on TV, he shrugs off the explosion. He watches the second half of the game. Only days later does he realize how numb he has become to the slaughter. He’s horrified by how the atmosphere of murder has changed him, then grateful that “I’m not dead yet. That somewhere inside me I’m conscious and human and still sane.”

When he eventually returns to the United States, Powell leaves behind a story that ends badly. The Indios tumble out of the first division and begin failing to meet their payroll. Their future seems fragile, and Juarez remains one of the world’s most lawless and dangerous cities. But in this clear-eyed and humane book Powell has succeeded in introducing his readers to a truth behind the grim and monotonous headlines. He has met the people of Juarez and found they are like people anywhere else, which allows him to believe that “[f]or as much danger as there is in this town, there’s even more love.”

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