



THIS LOVE IS NOT FOR COWARDS (2012)

Charles Blouin-Gascon September 26, 2012



Rating: 9.5/10

"If you're not positive, you're not growing," he argued. "You're already dead, and the bullet hasn't even found you yet." –p. 148

The key to living in Ciudad Juárez is not to care about the dead bodies – it's to see beyond the bodies. It's a necessity, because the bodies are among the first things a visitor sees in this Mexican city.

Robert Andrew Powell sees bodies soon after he moves to Juárez – two killed outside a convenience store near the airport. Powell sees the bodies, but nobody else minds them; not the *federales* (i.e. federal police officers), not the employees or customers of the store and not even the reporters. These two dead are just two of the 10 people killed every day in 2010 in Ciudad Juárez, a city about the size of Philadelphia.

A good day qualifies as one when only two bodies are found and both of them before noon. Homicides in Juárez have spiked from about 300 to 1,600 and then to 2,700 in 2009 when Powell decided to move there. But there are more than bodies in Juárez.

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At 259 pages, "This Love Is Not for Cowards: Salvation and Soccer in Ciudad Juárez" is Powell's account of life in Juárez. The city is on the Mexican side of the border with El Paso, and such proximity has both hurt and helped it. In the past three years, as many as 50,000 Juarenses have moved to El Paso. Not only that, but 160,000 families in total left Juárez to live elsewhere in Mexico. In a span of five years, unemployment in this border town has risen from below zero to 20 percent. Life in Juárez is rough and tough, and that's why everyone is leaving.

But life is also great – many say that it's like Las Vegas but Mexican, so better – and that's why when so many were fleeing the city, Marco Vidal chose to stay and sank into the city every single thing that he possessed.

Vidal is an American-born member of the Juárez Indios, a soccer team owned by Francisco Ibarra that plays in the Primera (i.e. the Mexican first division). After Powell arrives in Juárez, he gravitates toward the Indios, because that's what most Juarenses do. That the team will finish the season as the worst team in the history of the Primera and, ultimately, be relegated matters little at that time. The soccer season is divided into two championships: the *apertura* and the *clausura*.

Powell shadows the team through the disastrous *clausura* in "This Love," but the book is much more than a sports book, much like the soccer team is much more than just a soccer team.

For players like Marco Vidal or team captain Juan de la Barrera, the Indios represent a dream: the hope that everything is still possible. They play for the Indios, because playing soccer is what they have always dreamed of doing. They shrug the danger off too, because they're soccer players. "If they killed me," Vidal tells Powell, "it would really bring the heat, and they know it." They believe what they must to feel secure.

For citizens of Juárez, the Indios represent the hope that life might finally smile on their city one day. This isn't lost on the Indios players. Late in the season, the team invites a young girl to a morning practice. She is missing a leg; in its place is an artificial one, and players give her a ball and team jersey that they have autographed. Then she hits a few shots on Indios goalkeeper, Christian, and soon Juan de la Barrera joins them. By then, the Indios haven't been paid in months, but they "know they can still make people happy." The players know that soccer can help citizens forget the nightmare that a life in Juárez can sometimes be, and they're happy to help.

Soccer helps others see that Juárez has things to offer beyond violence and drugs. Powell writes that for the most part, "The whole world would rather pretend like Juárez doesn't exist."

There are a lot of drugs in Juárez, because the city is so close to the United States. *La Línea*, the Juárez drug cartel, is effectively ruling the city but it must now fight the Sinaloa cartel, and that's why the violence has escalated.

La Línea asks citizens only that they 'stay in line' – and they do, for fear that they might become one of the day's 10 bodies if they don't. That's why anyone who is killed is believed to have done something to deserve it.

Powell writes that every victim is killed twice, otherwise, why would they have been killed? Well, because the cartel can get away with it, that's why. There's never a reason to kill anyone, and the murders need to be romanticized. It's scary, because if it happened to someone who hasn't done anything then it could happen to anybody. It's a problem that so many are killed, but the bigger problem is that they are killed with impunity.

But that's not for lack of trying. Mexican President Felipe Calderón has countered the violence with a war on drugs, but this has only exacerbated the violence and created a culture of fear. The *federales* are not only inefficient at fighting crime, but they become potential targets for crimes themselves, and they don't address areas of need either.

For those reasons, it's tough to live in Juárez. But Powell says that whenever he left the city he'd miss it. It's safe across the border, in El Paso, but it's also boring. While life is dangerous, it's also inspiring. A life in Juárez is a life where Marco Vidal can't afford to take life for granted. Not for one moment when he's driving to his house after practice, or when friends and family celebrate his and his girlfriend Dany's wedding. Not ever. That's what all those bodies are a reminder of – that this love is not for cowards.

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