Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds: The Transformation of Mexico's Narco Cartels. By James H. Creechan. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2021.

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***Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds: The Transformation of Mexico's Narco Cartels*. By James H. Creechan. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2021. Hardcover ISBN: 9780816543281. Figures. Graphs. Maps. Tables. References. Index. Pp. 392. $100. (Also available in paperback, ISBN: 9780816540914, $35).**

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Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds: The Transformation of Mexico's Narco Cartels is the most recent published book pertaining to the subject of drug trafficking studies in Mexico, and is the work of James H. Creechan, a sociologist and a criminologist by training, and a retired professor at University of Alberta in Edmonton. Creechan's academic career led him to teach in multiple higher education institutions, including the Autonomous University of Sinaloa in Culiacán, Mexico, where he worked between 1998 and 2012. In that sense, his command of Spanish and his detailed knowledge and understanding of Mexican culture, society and politics is evident throughout the book.

Creechan begins "Introduction: Cradle of Narco Traffickers" with a personal account of his years living in Culiacán, and how the works of two "native Sinaloans" (p. 5), Luis Astorga and Lonides Alfaro, in addition to an issue of *GQ* magazine in Spanish, introduced him to the culture of drug trafficking in Mexico, of which "heart and soul" (p. 4) were Cualicán and Sinaloa respectively. Creechan also learned from his readings that this subculture is embedded into the different domains of Mexican society. Hence, the purpose of his investigative book: to deconstruct the myth of narco Mexico as set forth by official authorities such as the U.S. and Mexican governments. Informed by his doctoral studies and research, official records, academic and journalistic sources, both in Spanish and English, Creechan demonstrates how the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)'s account of Mexican cartels and capos dominated the popular narrative. Similarly, the DEA was established in the seventies under the Nixon administration to justify U.S. military intervention in countries such as Colombia and Mexico, for the sake of the war on drugs, which later became the war on drug lords.

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In his introductory chapter, the author posits that his book is aimed at two audiences: scholars and experts in drug cartels as well as amateur readers who have been exposed to the subject of narco through a variety of cultural manifestations and are eager to find out more. To that end, the "Abbreviations" section comes as a useful reference.

Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds is thoughtfully divided into eight parts, each one with an intriguing title, and opening with a provocative epigraph serving both as a summary of what follows and to stimulate readers to devour one chapter after another. The first part, "Cartels and Covert Netherworlds," explains the genesis of the "criminal-state alliance" (p. 27), a disturbing yet veracious statement that describes the long-deep connections between Mexican government officials, respected business figures, and narco organizations. The author provides compelling evidence to prove his point: the endless arrests of high-level political and public figures such as Genaro García Luna and Emilio Loyoza charged for narco-trafficking liaisons (pp. 32-33).

In the next chapter, "A Five-Decade Trajectory," the author guides us on a journey from 1971 to 2018 to examine the emergence and evolution of crime, violence, and cartels in Mexico. He does so by chronicling each one of the seven presidential *sexenios* (six-year tenures) of José López Portillo, Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, Vicente Fox Quesada, Felipe de Jesús Calderón Hinojosa and, finally, Enrique Peña Nieto, whose term saw the final recapture of El Chapo Guzmán on January 12, 2016 (p. 230). One of the events related in this chapter, which again emphasizes the Mexican government's corruption and its partnership with drug cartels, is Operation Leyenda (p. 48). This mission was the largest homicide investigation ever led by the DEA, following the gruesome murder in 1985 in Guadalajara of Enrique "Kiki" Camarena, a U.S. officer for the anti-narcotic agency. The operation not only uncovered the involvement of Mexican politicians with the crime, but it also revealed some troubling CIA coverups.

The third chapter, called "Drug Wars, Transformations, and Netherworlds," covers the presidency of populist Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known by his initials AMLO. His sexennial began in 2018 with the hope that it would bring an end to the recurring cycle of narco corruption and extreme violence. However, his dismissal of General

Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda arrest and charges against him by the American DOJ in 2020, revealed López Obrador's powerlessness and left much to desire in terms of political transformations. Of note, Cienfuegos was Peña Nieto's secretary of national defense, he was apprehended in Los Angeles and accused of "trafficking and money-laundering cartels (p. 69). Additionally, it is worth noting the AMLO administration surrendered to the narco mafia in October 2019, following the capture and release of Ovidio Guzmán López—yes, you read that correctly—the son of El Chapo Guzmán. The incident, which the author brings up in the first chapter (p. 35), is usually referred to as *Jueves Negro* (Black Thursday) or *El Culiacanazo*. Chapter 3 also serves as an explanatory section on the unique Mexican Revolution slogan, *sufragio efectivo, no reelección* (p. 62) (Real Democracy, No Reelection) and its contradictory consequences: we learn about how *narcopolítica* comes into play during what is popularly known as the hour of the grasshopper and the Year of Hidalgo (p. 62); that is, "the clandestine dance of corruption that traditionally accompanied transition" (p. 70) between presidential terms when high-profile officials rush to catch "new opportunities for self-enrichment" (p. 62).

In the fourth and fifth chapters, "The Roots of Narco Mexico" and "Wars Within, Between, and Against Cartels," Creechan seeks to explain the origin of narco-trafficking and crime-related organizations that shaped Mexico from 1888 to 2018. He revisits major events as he tells us about the powerful actors that built the covert underworld as we know it today.

Chapter 6, "The Mythological Life of El Chapo Guzmán," explores the way in which the head of the Sinaloa Cartel, Joaquín Archivaldo "El Chapo" Guzmán Lorea, has become an undeniable figure of the Mexican organized crime and, sadly, of popular culture as well. The broadcasting of his trial in Brooklyn that began in November 2018 only escalated his popularity, for better or for worse. Halfway between legendary tales and sinister facts, Creechan utilizes literature, including Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez's magical realism to draw parallels between El Chapo and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*'s character, Aureliano Buendía because, he remarks, "surrealism runs through the streets of Mexico and underpins all reality" (p. 189).

Chapter 7, "Fragmentation and Stabilization," analyzes criminal episodes of late occurrence related to drug trafficking. Here, the author does an

excellent job in addressing the semantics in Spanish and English of the concept "cartel," and its cultural implications and nuances, especially in an era where we have culture media (Netflix, Amazon Prime…) that reinforce stereotypes and misrepresentations; cartel "is so widely used as the categorical descriptor for all organized crime in Latin America" (p. 242). We also learn of the historic evolution of what constitutes a criminal organization versus the institutionalization of drug cartel discourse that has long been nurtured by the DEA. As a literary scholar of narcoculture, I find this chapter particularly insightful and an obligatory read for university students as an introduction to a course dealing with narco trafficking in Mexico.

The final chapter, "Transformation or Perdition," wraps up the book's argument by highlighting the current situation in Mexico and the challenges that Mexicans faced and still face with regard to the drug warfare. Despite the changes promised by AMLO, insecurity and bloodshed continue to skyrocket; as a matter of fact, "the year 2019 saw the highest level of homicide ever reported in any year of the modern era" (p. 282). Creechan ends his book on a sad yet honest note: It will take more than rhetorical speeches and catchy phrases like "Trust me; I've got this under control" (p. 287) for López Obrador to repair "Mexico's broken social fabric" (p. 286) and put an end to the covert netherworld.

Recent years have witnessed the publication of several valuable monographs on Mexican drug cartels, narco violence, and narco politics, written from the perspective of different disciplines like the Humanities and Social Sciences. This book makes a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge on the topic of narco Mexico by offering a critical approach in documenting the intricacies of Mexican history, culture, society and politics. I missed, however, the inclusion of Oswaldo Zavala's work (see *Los cárteles no existen. Narcotráfico y cultura en México* [*Cartels Don't Exist. Narcotrafficking and Culture in Mexico*]. Barcelona: Malpaso, 2018), especially because Creechan emphasizes throughout the book sections that his research is rooted in investigations led by Mexican journalists and reporters. Zavala, who is a former reporter of *El diario de Juárez* and currently a professor of Latin American Literature and Culture at the College of Staten Island and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has written extensively on the narco myth in Mexico and the narco-state collusion. Nevertheless, James E. Creechan is

very well acquainted with the current state of the field and this book is necessary and timely. Scholars and students across many disciplines, with an interest in the dynamics of narco politics in Mexico, will find plenty to be discovered in *Drug Wars and Covert Netherworlds*.