



The Mastermind

David Unger

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"In *The Mastermind*, David Unger's compelling antihero reminds us of the effects of privilege and corruption, and how that deadly combo can spill from the public to the private sphere. Unger's Guillermo Rosensweig is on a hallucinatory journey in which everything seems to go right until it goes terribly, terribly wrong. I couldn't put this down."

--**Achy Obejas**, author of *Ruins*

"Swaggering, visceral, and sharply astute, *The Mastermind* is a riveting account of one man's high-stakes journey to self-reckoning."

--**Cristina García**, author of *King of Cuba*

"David Unger has taken one of the strangest, most sinister affairs in Guatemalan history and, through the power of his imagination and mastery of his art, made it even stranger, richer, disturbingly more human and universal."

--**Francisco Goldman**, author of *The Interior Circuit*

"*The Mastermind* is a merciless analysis of the dark web of a country, perhaps of a whole continent, and, finally, of all forms of organized power. The novel raises fascinating questions regarding the literary tensions between real-life events and their fictionalization, between Guatemala's incredible Rosenberg case and Rosensweig, Unger's imagined alter ego—the way these two characters blur, argue, and battle in the reader's mind make this an engrossing read."

--**Andrés Neuman**, author of *The Things We Don't Do*

By all appearances, Guillermo Rosensweig is the epitome of success. He is a member of the Guatemalan elite, runs a successful law practice, has a wife and kids and a string of gorgeous lovers. Then one day he crosses paths with Maryam, a Lebanese beauty with whom he falls desperately in love...to the point that when he loses her, he sees no other option than to orchestrate his own death.

The Mastermind is based on the bizarre real-life story of Rodrigo Rosenberg, a Guatemalan attorney who, in 2009, planned his own assassination after leaving behind a video accusing Guatemalan president Álvaro Colom of his murder. (In April 2011, the *New Yorker* published an article by David Grann about Rosenberg which has been optioned by Matt Damon for his directorial debut.) This is a fascinating depiction of modern-day Guatemala and the corrupt, criminal, and threatening reality that permeates its society.

The Mastermind Details

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Author : David Unger

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From Reader Review The Mastermind for online ebook

David Dacosta says

Rating: 3.5 stars

If you've never had the opportunity to visit Guatemala, author David Unger's writing will take you there like a seasoned tour guide. He builds on the expression: a picture's worth a thousand words, by constructing paragraphs that manifest almost cinematically, showcasing the country's people and places, along with the degradation inflicting the nation's sense of morality. Much like the Caribbean, there's scenic beauty in Central America, though one can't escape the presence of political corruption, organized crime and economic disparity. Guillermo Rosensweig, the product of a German father, and Romania mother, is at the heart of the story. His European transplanted parents have managed to achieve a middle class lifestyle in the status fixated Guatemala of the 1970s and 80s.

Following a period of idling and indecision, the young Rosensweig eventually finds focus and leaves the comfort of his parents' home and relocates to New York City with a new wife in tow to attend Law School. There Guillermo comes to terms with his appetite for infidelity. Actions he believes to be discreet soon explode in his face in the most embarrassing of circumstances. Things between him and his wife Rosa Esther are never the same. Shortly thereafter, the couple returns to Guatemala. The author characterizes Guatemala as a country where affairs are common, and that men would rather play the field than depart loveless marriages.

The Mastermind is essentially about the unravelling of a man, largely expedited by his inability to resist his sexual cravings, and the madness that surrounds him in Guatemala City. Guatemala's murder rate is off the charts. After reading a section of the book which cites obscene murder stats for 2009, I paused, and had to check online to confirm that this was not simply hyperbole. It was reported in 2009 that on average 101 murders occurred weekly in Guatemala for that year. Scattered throughout The Mastermind are accounts of everything from brazen daylight kidnappings to execution style deaths. Guillermo's destructive life, coupled with the chaos that is Guatemala, is an overload to the senses. Unger concludes the story on a somewhat cryptic note. I would have preferred a more straight forward approach, but for some authors style supersedes the wants of the reader. It's hopeful nonetheless.

Ioana says

"Regrettably, if you are currently watching or listening to this message, it's because I was murdered by President Alvaro Colom..." (Youtube: The Unspeakable Murder of Rodrigo Rosenberg)

Rodrigo Rosenberg Marzano (b. 1960), a Guatemalan lawyer, was murdered on May 10, 2009. On May 12, a video Marzano had recorded before his death was posted to youtube. In it, he claimed that President de Colom was responsible for the death of two of his clients, political opponents of de Colom as well as for Marzano's own murder, and went on to list numerous allegations of corruption, money laundering, and other illegal activities allegedly engaged in by the administration. By May 13, the FBI had arrived on the scene to assist in the investigation as Guatemala was swept by protests, political upheavals, and arrests (including of a blogger who urged depositors to withdraw all assets from Banrural). Six months later, on January 10, 2010,

the UN International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala concluded that Marzano had commissioned his own death and been involved in an elaborate plot to bring down the Guatemalan president.

That is the true story. *The Mastermind* is a reimagined account of this stranger-than-fiction tale, spun as a love-story and vivid account of the corruption permeating Guatemalan politics.

Attorney Guillermo Rosensweig leads the picture-perfect life: wife, two kids, lucrative profession, nice home. He also sleeps around—a lot. And, of course, one day he falls madly in love (well, more like lust) with a client’s daughter. This client, incidentally, has been part of a commission set up to investigate the Guatemalan president for money laundering and other criminal activities. The story’s political and historical outlines roughly follow the ‘true story’ for much of the novel (with twists, which I will not spoil).

The Mastermind was for me an incredibly fascinating read, especially as my first novel by a Guatemalan author. I visited Guatemala in 2013 and was so struck by its creative, vibrant, verdant, colorful vibe (to this day, I have not visited a place as welcoming as Guatemala, and I do mean: *the place itself*, not just the people, who were also extremely friendly).

Guatemala 2013

As described by Unger, Guatemala is the ‘cultural’ center of Central America, but there are so many layers I, in my touristy, American naivete, was not aware of. I have read enough to know that we (the US) have wrecked significant chaos in Latin America by propping up puppet dictators amongst other imperial acts, especially during the Cold War (in our ever-feverish quest to squelch communist sympathies), and also enough to know I don’t really know enough to speak of this in an educated way, or even, apparently, to understand the undercurrents of the repercussions as they manifest today (during my visit).

While much of the story revolves around the tortured love-making of Rosensweig and his client’s daughter, what struck me most about *The Mastermind* was the portrayal of modern Guatemala, of a life lived in a place beset with corruption at all levels of political, economic, and social structures. Unger renders daily experience as an acceptance of inevitable incompetence, murder, exploitation, and fraud, as resignation. “The beauty of living in a country as corrupt as Guatemala,” he writes, “is that evidence can vanish as easily as smoke. Scarcity creates a society in which the truth of any situation can be variable or even paradoxical, and very few people will care. It happens all the time...” Still, there is an undercurrent of hope displayed by all characters, even Rosensweig himself, who, after all, by creating the video, declares his willingness to sacrifice himself in order to expose corruption and ‘save’ his country (true, his life was in shambles by this point and he is an at times detestable, egoistical character, but still, he is unquestionably passionate about the state of Guatemalan politics/life).

The book is not perfect—there is a good amount of ‘telling’, especially polemical asides about the political situation in Guatemala. I did not actually mind this at all (as I would if this book was set in the US and written by an American author), because this is the first I’ve read a Guatemalan voice on the matter. It’s also definitely rated “X” for graphic sex (not my thing in literature; usually I see it as a cop-out, but in this instance, it worked well with the tone/mood and characterizations).

Probably the most exciting effect of reading this is that I am now absolutely motivated to read more about Guatemalan history (I have had *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation* by Greg Grandin on my shelf since my trip to Guatemala, definitely time to move it to the top of the list—and also, to find history books written by Guatemalans); I also very much look forward to reading more Guatemalan fiction.

Definitely recommended!

Anna K says

When the protagonist is such a sordid character, it makes it very hard for the reader to sympathize and care about what fate he may meet enough to keep on reading. However, Unger smoothly accomplishes that feat: from someone who does not seem to make much difference whether he lives or dies - for Guillermo is not the best of sons nor the best of husbands, and at best an incompetent father - the protagonist grows on the reader, or better yet, creeps up on you, and you realize at the end that it does make a difference, although it might be too late. Add to that the author's vivid descriptions of life in Guatemala and all the drama that, although far-fetched, is actually real (it is based on a real-life event), and you get yourself involved in an intriguing plot. Definitely worth it.

Cat says

This historical based novel is compelling from beginning to end. The characters are strong and well defined with out of control egos, self-loathing and deadly encounters. Guillermo is sitting on top of the world and doesn't care who he spits on as long as everyone acts like it's cool. He had no problem cheating on his wife but once he falls in love with one of his paramours, everything changes. Now that he has a passion, paranoia, fear, depression all kick in to ruin his once picture-perfect life. Making him the perfect pawn to political agendas. And through it all, Unger manages to make this cave man sympathetic! A parallel to his Guatemalan homeland. All is believable if you let yourself believe.

An advanced copy of this book was provided for an honest review.

Ana María says

Muestra la realidad de muchas regiones latinoamericanas, y sin un romanticismo excesivo se incluye una historia de amor. Es un libro sin heroes, pero con gente del común lidiando con fallas sociales profundas.

David says

compelling thriller which is based on a true story...

Diogenes says

This book is many things; a paean to Guatemala, loving the land but bemoaning the corruption; a thriller of murder and intrigue; a highly erotic passion; and a tale of a soulless and amoral character who values nothing

more than himself, a serial adulterer who shows more care for his bicycle than his children - and yet one finds oneself rooting for him, hoping he will acquire his fantasy-dream.
And most of all, it's a very good read.

World Literature Today says

This book was featured in the Nota Benes section of the Sept/Oct 2016 issue of World Literature Today Magazine.

<http://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2...>

Bonnie says

Author gives background sufficient to let you shape the characters in your head before he launches into the main plot. Thank goodness, he knew when was enough background.... Once you start reading, the book is hard to put down. Based on a true story situated in Guatemala, the political climate makes me thankful I wasn't born there! A subplot has the married "hero" falling for a married daughter of a client & friend. I won't give away any of the circumstances of the story, I prefer the reader delves into the story with their imagination fresh. I was extremely disappointed with the ending, though it could lead to a follow-up book. Thanks for the opportunity to read & review this giveaway book.

Zohar - ManOfLaBook.com says

The Mastermind by David Unger is a novel about corruption and its toll on Guatemala. Mr. Unger, Guatemalan, writes in English but was still awarded Guatemala's Miguel Ángel Asturias National Prize in Literature for lifetime achievement in 2014.

Guillermo Rosensweig, a Guatemala Guatemalan lawyer with wife and kids has a string of lovers. One day he meets Maryam, a Lebanese woman which he falls in love with, and she with him.

Maryam's father, a client, is an honest businessman who refused to land a hand to the corrupt government. While doing so he puts in danger all who are close to him, including his daughter and lawyer.

My initial issue with The Mastermind by David Unger is that I did not like the protagonist, Guillermo Rosensweig., Mr. Rosensweig is a jerk, a bad father, bad husband, bad business partner and even cheats on the woman he cheats with. But he is a good and successful lawyer.

The novel, though, kept my interest by describing the corruption in Guatemala and how it affects many people throughout society. Having lived in New Jersey for most of my life I know how corruption in institutions has a way to become legalized and even moralized (not that I'm comparing the level of corruption) by community and political leaders.

This novel is certainly engaging and interesting even though it takes almost half the book to build up, and the corruption is only secondary to the protagonist's interest in leaving his wife for his lover. The nuances in the

text about the corruption and lifestyle in Guatemala could easily be glossed over.

The novel is based on a Guatemalan lawyer named Rodrigo Rosenberg who planned his own assassination while leaving a video claiming president Álvaro Colom had him murdered.

While the novel was not what I expected, it was an interesting read and the last third of the book was very quick and engaging. I was actually very surprised that the book was written in English, as the narrative style reminded me of many books from Latin American I read which were translated.

For more reviews and bookish posts please visit: <http://www.ManOfLaBook.com>

Kara says

Having heard nothing of *The Mastermind* or its author, David Unger, before reading the synopsis, my imagination was immediately captured by the concept of this novel. I was drawn first of all by the contemporary Guatemalan setting as depicted by an author intimately familiar with that society so as to provide the realistic texture and detail of the particular politics and culture. Moreover, the novel's categorization as a "literary thriller" matched my overall preference for literary fiction over otherwise appealing genre fiction, and the peculiar real-life story that inspired the book seemed to present an array of potentially fascinating psychological elements that could be featured in Unger's cast of characters. I entered to win an advance copy of the novel through LibraryThing's Early Reviewer program, in which winners are expected to provide honest reviews in return for the free new releases they receive, and I caught a lucky break.

Upon receiving the book this week, I commenced reading and consumed it whole in short order. I usually do not finish novels -- even relatively short ones in genres with fast-paced plots like this 330-page thriller -- in just one or two sittings. *The Mastermind* definitely engaged my interest and was a truly entertaining -- and therefore ultimately rewarding -- read for me.

That said, the book wasn't exactly what I expected it to be. I found that I was so engrossed in the protagonist's psychological experience (as intimately related by the third-person narrator) and the unfolding action itself that I didn't engage with any nuance in the text. Because of the narrative style, my intake of the story could almost be described as more experiential (i.e. seeing the action through the protagonist's eyes) than literary. Usually, I am able to engage empathetically with character perspectives, anticipate unfolding events in the story, as well as appreciate specific aspects of the author's craftsmanship in relating the narrative. Unger's writing just sucked me in, for better and for worse, I'd say.

I think I may re-read this novel to see if it bears more serious scrutiny. In the meantime, I would recommend it to all readers intrigued by the story-line who possess a tolerance for novels where events are filtered through the perspective of a largely unlikable and/or unrelated main character. I did not find this protagonist personally endearing at all (but then again, I didn't get too irritated by any particular of this character either). I don't expect my negative general impression will be universal among readers, but I think it wise to warn those who cannot abide unsympathetic main characters to consider this issue in evaluating this potential read.

Thanks for reading my ideas; I hope they prove somehow useful for at least some of you!

Book Haunt says

Guillermo Rosensweig didn't wish to tell his father that he didn't want to go into the family business when he graduated high school. Instead, he traveled Europe, attended college, got married, started a family and became a successful financial lawyer in Guatemala. By all appearances, Guillermo should be a very happy man. However, Guillermo is never quite satisfied. He thinks the world is his oyster and he is obsessed with his extramarital infidelities.

Guillermo takes on a new Lebanese client who runs his own textile factory. His client has also been selected to serve on the board of a Guatemalan bank. The client suspects that Guatemala and its banks have done some underhanded loans and wishes Guillermo to take a look. When the client starts getting threats, Guillermo isn't sure whether it comes from the direction of the man's textile dealings or his suspicions about the banking industry. What he is sure of, is that his client is an honest man. He's also sure that he's fallen in love with his client's daughter, the beautiful Maryam.

When Guillermo's wife leaves him, he thinks the door is wide open to spend the rest of his life with Maryam. But Maryam is married too and her culture is much harsher when it comes to a cheating wife. When Maryam and her father are assassinated, Guillermo's life begins to unravel. He's lost his family and his lover. His business is going down the tubes. He is drinking heavily and becoming more and more depressed. As his life comes to an end, Guillermo begins to look for some redemption.

I have to say that I had a tough time liking the first part of the book. Well, I guess it wasn't so much the book as it was the main character. Rosensweig is a despicable guy. He's self-centered and shows very little feeling for his wife and family. His preoccupation with his constant sexual forays made him even more unlikeable.

The second part of the book was much better. By that time, I had read the blurb inside the cover and realized that the book is based on a true story. This made what was happening much more intriguing. Guillermo's one redeeming quality is that he hates what has happened to his country. The author, David Unger, paints a good picture of the corruption in Guatemala. I have no way of knowing if he got close to what Rosensweig's real-life counterpart must have been like, but it appears that the author has done good research into this story. He builds it into an intriguing thriller with a fantastical ending. This is a good piece of historical fiction.

The Mastermind is based on the real life of Guatemalan attorney, Rodrigo Rosenberg. Rosenberg died in 2009. He recorded a videotape prior to his death. In the video, he stated that if he was murdered the President of Guatemala, Álvaro Colom Caballeros, his wife Sandra Torres de Colom, and his private secretary, Gregorio Valdés were directly responsible. After Rosenberg's murder, attempts to suppress the video only caused it to go viral. His murder and the video caused a national uproar, with the President denying the accusations and the public calling for his resignation. When the United Nations and the FBI launched an investigation into Rosenberg's claims, they concluded that Rosenberg masterminded his own death. Yet in a country that is rife with corruption, the truth of whether Mr. Rosenberg actually planned his death, or was murdered, can and has been disputed.

Those of you who faithfully read my blog know that I just had to look up the real story. I found the full story along with gruesome pictures of Rosenberg's body. I also watched Rosenberg's video, filmed in Spanish but with English subtitles, and released in two parts on YouTube.

What a bizarre news story this made! If you're interested, here are the links to the video: Part 1 and Part 2

I want to thank the publisher (Akashic Books) for providing me with an Early Reviewers copy through Librarything for an honest review.

Alejandro Higuera says

En general me gustó la manera de redactar de este autor, pues describe muchas situaciones que nos son familiares a la gente que vivimos en Latinoamerica. Me parece que lo que no terminó de gustarme del libro es que no se define bien que tipo de libro es y que temática busca abordar, es decir, parece que el tema central será la corrupción y malos manejos de gobiernos, pero después parece que el tema principal es la relación entre los personales principales.

Finalmente hay muchas cuestiones que el autor plantea, pero que no se sabe al final que paso. Por ejemplo en parte del libro parece que Mayram está embarazada pero después no se menciona nada al respecto, tampoco se sabe como queda la historia de Miguel y el presidente y si el video se difunde o no.

Allan says

A complete fictional, different and refreshing story and ending based on real life events that occurred in Guatemala, it's based on the Rosenberg case that happened a few years ago. A worth reading, fully entertaining.

Folu says

All smut, no substance

Didn't finish the book. Was all smut with no development of a plot as indicated in the summary. Would not recommend
