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A raw account of a young American abroad grasping for meaning, this pulsating story of violent protests, illegal border crossings and loss of innocence raises questions about the futility of borders and the irresistible power of nationalism.

Illegal tells the true story of love and deception, revolutions and deportations as it chronicles the trials of John Dennehy. Naïve New Yorker, Dennehy refuses to be part of the feverish nationalism of post 9/11 America. His search for hope takes him to Ecuador, where he falls in love with firebrand Lucia, who perfects his broken Spanish while they find solidarity in the brewing social upheaval. Amid the unrest, Dennehy is arrested and deported to the United States but he has found something worth fighting for.

Illegal Details

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Author : John Dennehy

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Joshua Kramer-eisenbud says

I think you would be hard pressed to find a book more relevant in today's climate than *Illegal*: a true story of love, revolution and border crossings. The author, John Dennehy, does a terrific job of welcoming you into his mind, and invites you on a journey through South America. While the writing takes a political tone from the start, you don't have to necessarily agree with the author in order to enjoy this book. Not only is this a quick, entertaining story, but it's incredibly thought provoking. Whether intentional or not, Dennehy humanizes the trials and tribulations many people go through in search of their best life. With the world both connected and divided more than ever before, this is an important and engaging read and I highly recommend it.

Valerie says

The self-awareness and honesty truly makes you feel everything the author is feeling throughout this story. It's a fascinating look at both the broader ideas surrounding revolutions, governments and borders, and the more personal side of struggling to make a place home when you feel your own home doesn't share your ideals any longer. I finished feeling both eager to set out for a new place and simultaneously frustrated by all that a passport represents. Great read.

Mads Eriksen says

John Dennehy has written an honest and impressive account of his cross-border love story in South America, and its challenges of deportation and illegal border crossing.

Part coming-of-age, part a dive into complicated and intense love, it makes for a compelling and exciting read. What surprised me the most was how suspenseful it was, how I found myself unable to put it down for extended parts of the book. Even so, Dennehy invites the reader to put these events into the context of privilege, alienation, and not least - the purpose and challenge with nation-borders. While I do not necessarily agree with Dennehy in all of his ideas on the matter, I still found it a refreshing and well-founded approach to very complex problems.

A very nice travel read, that I can truly recommend.

Olivia-Savannah Roach says

When I first read the synopsis for this book, I mistakenly thought it fiction. I know, I can't believe it either. In the end I actually chose to read non-fiction! And I am so glad that I did, because Dennehy has had a very interesting life, this one almost read like fiction, and I learned so so much. I have been trying to read more books set in or focusing on Latin America, and with this one being set across Ecuador, the US and some other Latin American countries he visits, this helped me on that journey.

If I am going to write this review, I would like to start by focusing on the themes which were developed and woven into the ‘story’ (if I can call it that) so well. He has some very interesting things to say about privilege and his realisation of him having it as a white, American man living in Ecuador. People treated him differently even though he didn’t want to be treated better than others. His main mission when moving to Ecuador was to become like a native and blend in. He finds out this will be harder than expected and tries to reject his privilege. But sometimes he needs it, which is interesting. I liked his debate with the benefits and negatives of having it, and how he handles situations which involves privilege.

He also says some very intriguing and thought-provoking things about deportation, living illegally in a country and how dehumanising the situation can be. When we watch the news, we see and hear the term ‘illegal immigrant’ being thrown around constantly. Immediately, we can assume the person is in the wrong (they are breaking the law, after all.) But reading this book showed me that not every scenario is so black and white. I have never thought about how it feels to deported, or what the situation may be like, and reading this book was an eye-opening experience for me. Dennehy is a very open-minded man, and seeing his development certainly fuelled my investment in his story.

I also really appreciated reading about his twisted love story. The female love interest has had a difficult past, and it does influence their relationship. It makes some elements of their love toxic. But then at the same time, when their relationship is going well, it is almost too perfect. It was completely invested in seeing their romance unravel – riding through the highs and the dangerously low lows – to see where they ended up by the end of the book. Dennehy does such a good job at conveying his own emotions through writing that when he was hurt, I felt it. When he was in love, I felt it too. We truly go on this journey with him. But don’t worry, the romance does not take over his tale. It fits in to his life and the writing as romance does in real life.

It was so amazing to see the spectacular lows and highs he experiences. There are some terribly, atrocious wrong doings which happen to him. But every now and again, there are some astonishing kindnesses that people grant him too. It was such a realistic representation of real life – not everything is roses and rainbows, but there are moments which are down, and some which are so good and heart-warming that your faith in humanity is restored.

The are some brief moments where he talks about teaching English in Ecuador and working with his students. Especially the kids. I loved those passages, and the photos in the middle of the book which brought the story to life even more. I have worked with kids before, also teaching English, so it really made me smile reading about it.

The writing style is the perfect balance between fictional and non-fiction. While this is non-fiction and I believe everything that Dennehy writes he truly did experience, he writes it almost like a fictional story. Which worked perfectly for me because I don’t usually read non-fiction. It was unlike the fictional style I have read in any autobiography before. He never slips into dishing out facts to get the reader up to speed. Rather, he weaves them into the story.

Lastly, I want to mention how much I learned while reading. Not only did I learn about the concepts and themes, or about the Ecuadorian culture, or humanity and human traits, but I also learned about the political situation in Ecuador. For a long time there was a lot of political turmoil and instability. There were a lot of protests and barricades by the people in rebellion of the government and their leaders. I can’t speak for the present day situation, but I liked learning more about the politics and the governing system in Ecuador.

Again, the author never spouts facts at the reader, but rather weaves it into the story-telling seamlessly.

Relevance to today: There is so much I could mention here, but I will focus on the personal illegal immigrant story. We hear the term ‘illegal immigrant’ all the time, but when we hear it we don’t picture an American in another country. Quite the opposite! It was really enlightening to read a book which gave this reverse perspective and gave insight into the emotions and thoughts that come with being an illegal immigrant. I will definitely read more stories and works about illegal immigrants in the future.

This review can originally be found on Olivia's Catastrophe: <http://oliviascatastrophe.com/2018/05...>

Ryan Samuel says

A powerful first hand account of love and separation, this book had tears streaming down my cheeks by page 16. Its engrossing story and steady pace kept me, a slow reader who rarely finishes a book, hooked from start to finish. A rare glimpse into a painful reality gives the reader a personal connection to a geopolitical discussion that desperately needs more attention. I 100% recommend this book to anyone with a beating heart.

Amy says

This is a very special book. There are a lot of memoirs out there of white people having plucky adventures in dangerous lands. This is not one of those books. Dennehy is an extraordinary person with integrity and a deep desire to understand how the world works. This takes him to dangerous places, not for the thrill of it, but to seek truth. The fact that what he finds is complicated and uncomfortable, and challenges everything he ever assumed, makes this a raw, compelling and honest book. And lest it sound too worthy from that description, rest assured it is a page turner as good as any fictional thriller. This is mostly because of the love story at its core, which is passionate and fraught with lies, danger and misunderstandings. This relationship explodes against a background of serious political unrest, and Dennehy is forced to cross borders illegally in order to follow his heart. There has never been a more important time to see through the eyes of those whose lives are thwarted by borders.

The writing is refreshing, honest, un-padded and has no affectation. Dennehy is able both to vividly portray his own feelings, but also to dispassionately recount the situations he was involved in. You will not regret reading this and I believe that once it gains momentum, it will be rightly regarded as an important and unique book.

Charles Ray says

September 11, 2001 saw a resurgence in the United States of nationalism (the belief that one’s country is better than all others), thinly disguised as patriotism (love of one’s country), which has, since the 2016 elections, only grown worse. *Illegal* by John Dennehy is a memoir by a young American, following the author’s journey of discovery, beginning with the reelection of George Bush to his second term, when Dennehy decided to leave his home country to find true meaning in his life.

In Ecuador, a country in the throes of profound political change, Dennehy meets Lucia, an activist, and begins to discover the meaning of national and personal identity; a journey that begins and ends at the same place. Along the way, the author offers insights into the inconsistencies that exist in an increasingly globalized world that recognizes the free flow of money, goods, and ideas, while at the same time, restricting the movement of people.

A compelling story of the meaning of culture and nationality, and how one person learns to cope with them. A must-read for anyone who wants to begin to make sense of a world that sometimes seems to be going mad.

Julie says

Firstly, I want to thank the author for making his book available as a giveaway for my book club and for my friend Lory for applying for us. I encourage you to read her review as it will be better, and less bias, than mine.

Secondly, my disclaimer. I am in line with the author's political views. I found the author to mirror some of my closest and dearest friends. Unfortunately, I am a pragmatist and I found the author, and admittedly those closest and dearest friends mentioned (and they know this), exhausting. I can't romanticize political movements. While I support the cause, I grow increasingly jaded and apathetic, so, the abundance of idealism in the story irritated me. Apologies if I can't provide a better review than "okay" but better to be candid as to the subjectivity of my review. My internal devil's advocate was provoked as I read.

Thirdly, the brutal honesty of this personal journey is refreshing. Having spent time in Central America/Caribbean and studying Latin American politics and immigration, this is, sadly, a realistic depiction. The retelling of a drama filled first love was also admirable because many would smooth over the ugliest times with euphemisms. All and all it was well written, creative but not overly flowery. Mr. Dennehy's writing made me feel like I was right there in the scene.

Lastly, while the epilogue saved the book for me, I am left feeling frustrated with the judgemental tone. If you're a lefty, liberal, dissident, rebel, idealist, etc. I highly recommend. For an over analytical, cynic like me, it needed more anthropological reflexivity and/or self challenge. Some does come, but too late.

Good luck to the author on his current endeavors at the United Nations.

Matt Elzweig says

In *Illegal*, journalist John Dennehy takes readers on a guided tour of the precarious border crossings he took shortly after the reelection of George W. Bush. One such crossing ended with his deportation back to the United States from Ecuador. And yet he was driven to sneak back into that country by a blinding love, and a life that often seemed--and would often prove--too good to be entirely true. His decision to live outside the US was the result of his many brushes with an uptick in nationalism there, including getting beaten up by a mob in the streets of New York because he dared protest the lead-up to the Iraq War.

Illegal is narrative journalism and autobiography that goes by quickly at about 200 pages. But Dennehy uses his own story as a lens through which to address issues much larger than himself. It's not just self-indulgent travel porn. In a very self-aware, earnest way, he asks big questions. Is it possible to maintain your most deeply held beliefs and goals in the face of bruising reality? If goods are allowed to cross borders freely, why can't people (with the minimum amount of necessary security in place)? Are people who they are or are they who we perceive them to be and who they present themselves as? At the outset of Illegal, Dennehy is a recent college graduate with a robust set of ideals. As the story progresses he doesn't lose them but they are tempered. One gets the sense that were the story to begin with an older, more mature Dennehy, he might have been able to get close to anticipating the very mess his country is in now.

Lisa says

Having spent some time volunteering in Ecuador I found this book especially interesting. Some really wonderfully vivid descriptions of life down there that reminded me a lot of some of my own trips at times, you know, sans illegal border crossings. I was fascinated by the authors take on borders; I'm not sure I completely agree with everything but it's really got me thinking. I guess I've never really considered a lot of what the book talks about, though I'm happy to change that :)

Carol D. Marsh says

This story is both timely and timeless. As our country seems to be headed toward fear, isolation and jingoism, Dennehy's life and writing offers us an opposing view of how we could be. I really enjoyed this book, and read it straight through in a few days.

Derek Koscioletk says

A tremendous book cover to cover, 'Illegal' is a powerful and moving autobiographical account that reads like a novel. From the first page I was hooked, and devoured it in only a few days. As the subtitle from the title implies ('Love, Revolution, and Crossing Borders'), the book deals with a lot of complex and deeply important issues of the human condition. But, it's not a slow philosophical grind. Rather, Dennehy keeps the story plot-driven, with nuggets of keen observation and brutally honest retrospective that amplify what is already a fascinating story. After reading the book, I was forced to investigate some of my own beliefs in borders and nations, and I was also inspired to get back to travelling myself. This book is not quite like anything I've read before, and I highly recommend it to others – it is an exhilarating journey.

John Dennehy says

This story is atypical. It's nearly the opposite of the stereotype many of us have about who illegally crosses borders. My hope is that that strangeness makes the reader take a step back and think more critically about underlying issues like borders, identity and nationalism. This experience changed my life and redefined how I view the world and I want to give the reader an intimate and honest look through my eyes.

BitcoinKing says

As soon as i read that the protagonist moved out of the US in response to the reelection of Bush I knew i had to read this one. Even with that interesting start I think my favorite parts were all towards the end as the protagonist matured. I liked this book in ways i never would have expected when i picked it up--made me think about the world.

John Galt says

In this captivating autobiography, John Dennehy transforms from an idealistic recent college graduate into a veteran of traversing seedy borders in South America. Through the author's eyes we experience the maturation of man in a foreign land, which like himself, is changing rapidly. Throughout the story we are granted privy access to the development of his geopolitical beliefs and the ramifications of putting ideologies into action. Propelled by love and an affection for his new homeland, John fights relentlessly to bring the dream into a reality. At times the adventurer is dispirited by his surrounding circumstances, but the hope remains. The gripping account is genuine at its core and will leave you wanting more. From cover to cover, a fantastic read!
