

White, W. (2012). Book Review: Don Winslow (2015). *The Cartel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 640 pages, \$17.08, ISBN 978-1-101-87499-8.

Addiction is as much a worldwide geopolitical threat as it is a public health threat. So-called recreational drug use, addiction, licit and illicit drug trafficking, and the unintended consequences of national and international drug control policies have deeply wounded the cultural, economic, and political fabric of numerous countries and strained international relations. Don Winslow has authored two fact-based novels that detail such influences on the cultural, political, economic, and spiritual life of the people of Mexico. Winslow's works are controversial because of the conclusions he has drawn from his decades of research, including his [open call for drug legalization](#), but the education of any serious student of drug policy would be incomplete without serious reflection on Winslow's *The Power of the Dog* (2005) and *The Cartel* (2015). These twin works propel the reader beyond flashing news headlines of narco massacres and narco king prison escapes to how America's insatiable appetite for drugs and American drug policies have inflicted deep wounds upon the culture and people of Mexico--wounds that may take generations to heal.

Readers should be warned that these books are quite disturbing in their unrelenting portrayal of mass kidnapping, torture, rape, murder, decapitation, and incineration, as well as the corrosion of Mexico's major social institutions and the moral corruption of nearly everyone on both sides of the drug wars. These books are not for the faint of heart. I found myself asking, "If I can barely stand to read the brutality of these accounts, what must it be like for the people who have witnessed and lived this for so many years?" I found myself wondering how I would respond to someone approaching me with the decision to accept a bag of money for support of a drug cartel or face the immediate death of myself and my family members. Such choices pervade this story of personal tragedies and cultural devastation. Yet, these well-researched and fluidly composed books provide only a partial glimpse into the deaths and disappearance of more than 100,000 Mexican citizens during the narco wars of recent decades.

Regardless of political persuasion, readers will close these books with a desperate sense that better strategies must be found to manage the problems that can result from excessive drug use—strategies that can avoid the horrific side effects that have been inflicted on individuals, families, communities, and whole cultures. I hope the Winslow books will add weight to calls to re-evaluate American drug control and enforcement policies—"a searching and fearless moral inventory" in recovery language. What role has America played in this massive loss of Mexican lives, the infusion of fear, futility, and hopelessness into Mexican culture? How can amends be made for such harm?

I turned the last page of *The Cartel* with a profound sense of sadness and a belief that America had done little in recent decades to alter the destruction wrought by the criminal drug syndicates and by militarized, demoralized, and oft-corrupted drug enforcement bodies. I also closed that last page with a desire to write a letter of apology on behalf of my country for the suffering America's insatiable drug appetites and misguided drug policies have inflicted upon the people of Mexico and upon its cultural institutions. This blog is that letter. We must find a way to move beyond despair to hope if both of our cultures are to find recovery within our shared story.