

El Narco, a book review

For those of us who love Mexico, *El Narco* is both essential and disheartening reading. Essential because it explains in common sense terms what has happened and continues to happen to our southern neighbor. Disheartening because it shows that the prospects for improvement are slim to none.

[Ioan Grillo](#) has reported on crime in Mexico for over ten years and he not only knows his subject backwards and forwards, but, unlike the vast majority of journalists, is somehow able to leave his personal politics (whatever they are) out of his writing. In *El Narco*, he tells the story of how drugs have virtually ruined Mexico and continue to do so. He provides a coherent history of Mexican trafficking, from when Chinese laborers first brought opium poppies to Mexico to when, not so long ago, narcotics were quickly passed through the country on their way to U.S. consumers by a few well organized cartels with more or less established territories and little internal violence. He then deals with the current situation where a multitude of cartels and sub-gangs have become involved in kidnapping when they are not vying for smuggling routes and fighting each other and the government's anti-drug efforts with tactics that make chainsaw massacre movies seem tame.

Grillo uses true stories to explain how the lack of economic opportunity for so many has led to a culture where kids are often raised more by gangs than their parents, causing them to grow up with no sense of right or wrong and the belief that killing in as brutal a manner as possible is the ideal solution to most problems.

As painful as it is, reading the book means you will no longer have to say, "What the f--- happened to Mexico and when is it going to go back to the way it used to be, when the worst things we had to worry about was having our pockets picked or bribing a traffic cop?" Unfortunately, that's not going to happen anytime soon, and the best we can do is to either play the odds, stay away from the country we love, or judiciously visit the few places that have not, so far, been deemed worth fighting over by the thugs.